ART DECO SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON

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ADSW is a non-profit organization incorporated to foster public awareness and appreciation of the Art Deco period through volunteer actions to preserve the era’s decorative, industrial, architectural, and cultural arts.

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Trans-Lux is looking for a few good writers. Please submit manuscripts and photographs to Jim Linz, PO Box 221011, Chantilly, VA 20153. Please enclose a self-addressed envelope for return of material. Submission of letters/articles implies the right to edit and publish.

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On the Cover: Cover art from a 1923 Marshall Fields catalog.
New Officers Elected

At the June 2010, Board meeting, a new slate of officers was elected:

President—Jim Linz  
Vice President—David Cotter  
Treasurer—Lou Simchowitz  
Secretary—Jeanette Radford

Webmaster Desperately Needed

With Brian Whaley’s planned departure from the Board set for the end of December, ADSW has an immediate need for a volunteer to maintain the website and send out periodic email announcements. Board membership is welcomed but not a prerequisite for the position.

Brian, who has served ably both as ADSW’s membership chair and webmaster, will prepare some basic instructions on how to process web updates and send email announcements.

If you are willing to help out, contact Jim Linz at jlinz@adsw.org.

World’s Fair Program a Success

Washington’s World’s Fair Weekend proved popular with ADSW members and drew rave reviews from both National Building Museum officials and New York Art Deco Society board members. Among the notable accomplishments:

♦ Both sessions of the behind the scenes tour of the Smithsonian library and archive collections “sold out.”
♦ Both curator-guided tours of the National Building Museum exhibition “sold out”
♦ Although the “Dawn of a New Day” benefit concert was cancelled due to illnesses in the families of two performers, the fundraising drive generated about $10,000 in donations and grants to support

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the restoration of the Belgian Friendship building from the 1939 New York World’s Fair.

♦ ADSW’s sponsorship of the public program at the National Building Museum generated about $1,000 in revenues for the museum in addition to garnering free admissions for 65 Art Deco Society members.

♦ Based on a suggestion from restoration architect and NYADS board Member David Gibson, Bells for Peace president E. Dianne Watkins is actively pursuing purchase of an electronic carillon as a lower cost alternative to purchase of bells. Preliminary approvals have already been obtained.

**Dawn of a New Day Concert**  
**Coming to Jordan Kitts**

The Retropolitans—Doug Bowles, Alex Hassan, and Cindy Hutchins—who developed “Dawn of a New Day: Songs from World’s Fairs of the 1930s” specifically for ADSW and Washington’s World’s Fair Weekend, will present the concert Sunday, February 13, 2011, at the Jordan Kitts piano studio in Merrifield, Virginia. The concert will not be sponsored by ADSW.

Contact Jim Linz jimlinz@verizon.net for details/reservations.

**World’s Fair Billfold on eBay**

In addition to hosting the Saturday evening reception during Washington’s World’s Fair Weekend, and donating a major portion of the expenses, ADSW member Ana Escobar donated a leather billfold from the 1939-40 New York World’s Fair.

The billfold will be auctioned on eBay, with all proceeds going to ADSW. A $100 reserve price will be set for the auction.

Many thanks to Ana for her generosity!
Vitaphone Program to Resume

ADSW’s bi-monthly screenings of Vitaphone shorts will resume in the new year at a new location. The new parking meters at the Sumner School make it impractical to continue the programs downtown. ADSW member Mark Jordan has offered to host future programs at his home in Reston, Virginia.

Attendance at the Vitaphone programs is free, but donations are encouraged to help ADSW fund the restoration of one or more shorts.

Dates will be announced soon.

Fly Down to Rio...for the World Congress on Art Deco

Registration for the 11th World Congress on Art Déco, scheduled for Rio de Janeiro, August 14 - 21, 2011 will open soon. A pre-Congress program will be held in São Paulo from August 11 - 13. The 2011 Congress will be the first in Latin and South America.

For up to the minute details check the website for the Instituto Art Déco Brasil—www.artdecobrasil.com. Questions should be directed to Márcio Alves Roiter, founder and President of the Instituto Art Déco Brasil. He can be reached at marcioroiter@uol.com.br

If you plan to attend the World Congress, or are looking for a traveling companion to share expenses, please send a message to programs@adsw.org.

In Memoriam

Rex Ball (1934-2010)

Co-Founder and President of the Tulsa Art Deco Society
DECO DISCOVERIES:
STRANGE MIDWESTERN DECO

By Clive Foss

At first sight, Covington, Indiana, doesn’t appear to have much going for it. A town of 2,500 people in the flat west central part of the state, its only claim to fame seems to be that Lew Wallace, author of *Ben Hur* lived here in the 1850’s. But a sign on the interstate points to paintings in the local courthouse – and a rural Midwestern courthouse can often mean PWA, 1930’s and Deco. In this case, there’s something amazing.

The Fountain County courthouse is a Public Works Administration project, finished in 1937 at a cost of $228,822 (the PWA sponsored some 34,000 projects between 1933 and 1939; it put up the money but didn’t dictate the style of architecture or the materials used). The building is pure Classical Moderne (‘Greco Deco’), its sober limestone facade dominated by tall fluted pilasters.

On either side, mythical beasts curve into what look like great drinking horns. The interior keeps up the same motifs with very precise detailing.

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The real treat – and surprise— comes from the interior decoration. Both floors of the building are lined with murals by local artists that depict the history of the region from the Indians and conquistadors through the post-World War I period. Nice, but nothing too surprising here – the kind of thing you find (not always so well done) in 1930s post offices throughout
the country. The local brochure claims that ‘this is the only known place in the world where such an exhibit of history exists’. That sounds more than dubious, but it’s hard to argue with ‘this artistic attraction is unlike any other courthouse in the United States’, when you contemplate the two main murals by the doorway.

These are works of a native son who made good. Eugene Savage (1883-1978), born in Covington, studied in the Chicago Art Institute and the American Academy in Rome and wound up teaching at Yale for 28 years. He was a prolific muralist and a man of tremendous influence who ensured that
the regionalist style he and Thomas Hart Benton advocated found a major place in the government-sponsored works of the time. He went on painting into advanced age: one of his most successful grand murals, The Spirit of the Land Grant College that adorns Purdue University, was only completed in 1961.

At first sight, it’s hard to know what to make of Savage’s Covington murals. Both include naked ladies of strange proportions, one happily cavorting, the other on her knees in a state of bondage. Surely, the Roosevelt administration wasn’t supporting pornography or perversion? Very strange indeed.

Fortunately, the brochure helps the viewer: both panels are about taxes (!). The first, called The Receiver of Taxes, portrays ‘fair and unfair, just and unjust, efficiency and carelessness in the collection of taxes’. On the left are honest people, like the farmer, paying what is due, with others in the background lining up to take the jobs that will ultimately generate tax revenue. The mother with her child is evidently part of this theme (though is she using the chicken to pay her taxes in kind?). She can’t keep her disapproving eyes off the nude, partly separated from her by a wall, who seems to be wallowing in coins and dollar bills and is being embraced or threatened by a monstrous octopus-like creature that represents the greed of those who steal from the public till. Two evil-looking figures in the background shovel public debt onto an old man’s shoulders, while his companion is so overwhelmed that he’s turned upside down.

The second panel seems to focus on the contrast between the respectable ladies in crinolines and the naked blonde in bondage. This one is called The Disbursement of Tax Dollars and portrays the artist’s mother (the musician) and his grandfather (the farmer). Together with the happy children, they represent ‘conservation’ — that is, the productive use of taxes to support a flourishing rural economy. On the right, two horrible figures — one of them in Roman dress — propel an enormous tractor that represents war, the ultimate waste of taxes (could this refer to Mussolini who was famously depicted driving a tractor?). The girl in bondage before the cement mixer that pours out money and disembodied hands apparently stands for the impoverishment and helplessness of those who live under regimes whose ideals are violent warfare.

I’m not sure this explains everything in these very untypical Art Deco paintings. They seem to fit best in the context of the Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera whose Struggle of the Classes (1935, in Mexico City) has some common elements with them. If you’re in Indiana, have a look and see what you make of it all.
Silver Spring’s
1939 World’s Fair Home
By David S. Rotenstein

(Editor’s Note: David Rotenstein is a former Chairman of the Montgomery County, Maryland Historic Preservation Commission and is currently the principal historian at Historian for Hire.)

In the spring of 1939 a small Silver Spring, Maryland, subdivision’s marketing scheme drew thousands of sightseers who wanted a glimpse of Washington’s 1939 World’s Fair Home. The modest Cape Cod cottage at 10163 Sutherland Road was built to specifications drawn for Demonstration Home Number 15 in the 1939 New York World’s Fair Town of Tomorrow. Silver Spring’s replica of Demonstration Home Number 15, which was sponsored by the Johns-Manville Corporation and dubbed by the Fair the “Long Island Colonial Home,” appears to have been the only licensed replica of a Town of Tomorrow Home built outside of the Fair. Curators of the National Building Museum’s new exhibit, Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s (through July 2011), have included a panel depicting the Silver Spring home.

The World’s Fair home was the brainchild of James and Nelle Wilson. The Wilsons came to the Washington area in 1934 or 1935; James was a civil engineer who went into business with Washington real estate developer Waldo M. Ward and Nelle was the daughter of Chicago newspaperwoman Margaret Foley. The path the Wilsons took to our area is unclear but their impact survives in the subdivision they created in 1936. Northwood Park, the heart of the North Four Corners neighborhood, was platted in early 1936 after Ward bought approximately 28 acres of forested farmland west of Colesville Pike. The Wilsons then formed a company, Garden Homes, Inc., to sell Northwood Park’s homes and lots. By July of 1936, 20 homes were under construction.

Northwood Park was an ordinary subdivision with modest brick Cape Cod cottages and larger stone Tudor Revival houses marketed to young professionals with new families. Using common real estate trade tools, Garden Homes lured prospective buyers through creatively illustrated and worded display ads hawking Northwood Park’s rustic charm and affordability. The firm used themed models like the Bride’s Home and the Anniversary Home equipped with the latest modern gas appliances; some came with a brand new car in the garage and a supply of groceries. Garden Homes’ ads were packed with multiple meanings to bring middle class doctors, engi-

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neers, and government employees into their subdivision. Their most successful marketing vehicle was the World’s Fair Home which drew thousands of sightseers and many prospective buyers to Northwood Park in the spring of 1939 during a carefully crafted 120-day marketing campaign.

The 1939 World’s Fair Town of Tomorrow was built along a cul-de-sac designed to evoke the popular Garden City single-family-home suburbs being built throughout the United States. Demonstration Home No. 15 was designed to appeal to homebuyers driven by “tradition and sentiment” looking for all of the “comfort and convenience” afforded by the modern building materials used to build the house and its state-of-the-art appliances. The approximately 1,228-square-foot home included a fully finished basement; a first floor with kitchen, maid’s room and workshop in addition to the living room and dining room; and, an upper floor with three bedrooms.

Demonstration Home No. 15 was singled out by the media as one of the

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most desirable homes in the Town of Tomorrow. The home was featured on
the cover of the June 1939 issue of American Builder and Building Age and
it was illustrated in McCall’s magazine as well as in the Washington Post

The contract between Garden Homes and the World’s Fair required Gar-
den Homes to call the home “a New York World’s Fair House” and for “the
plans and specifications used by the Fair Corporation in the construction of
House No. 15 of the Town of Tomorrow” to be followed exactly. Garden
Homes was also required to retain the original architects, the New York
firm of Godwin, Thompson and Patterson, to provide the original plans.

Garden Homes got some leeway in adapting the original design to the
home planned for Silver Spring. For example, since the original Demostra-
tion Home No. 15 had no basement and therefore no heating or hot water
appliances, the Fair Corporation allowed Garden Homes to, “use equip-
ment to suit local construction.”
Exterior features that clearly were modified include the building’s footprint and porch railings. Because of the unusual lot size Garden Homes selected for its replica and inadequate rear yard setbacks to construct the rear ell as designed by architects Godwin, Thompson, and Patterson, the garage was brought into the basement level beneath the workshop. Unlike the original Demonstration Home 15, which was built on a level surface, the Silver Spring house was built into a bank. The modifications to the design compressed the footprint fit all of the rooms into the envelope designed by the architects.

Another significant deviation from the World’s Fair original involved modification of the front and kitchen side porches. The Silver Spring home’s front porch was built with metal porch rails instead of wood balusters. Photos show Demonstration Home 15 with wood porch rails, painted white.

Because of the lot’s topography in Silver Spring, the rear yard drops significantly and the kitchen side porch is located back far enough from the home’s front plane that steps from the side yard are required to access the door. The original, again because it was built on level ground, had no steps leading to this porch.

Garden Homes staged a ceremonial groundbreaking April 7, 1939. Over the next three months the Washington Post published articles documenting the progress on the house. When the house was completed in July 1939, Garden Homes hosted another event that included a parade from downtown Silver Spring and up Colesville Road ending at the World’s Fair Home. The July 14, 1939, dedication included a speech by Maryland Secretary of State Francis Petrott followed by a private cocktail party for local, state, and federal officials as well as the project’s various corporate sponsors.

The home remained open to the public throughout July and into August of 1939. According to the Washington Post, about 4,500 people visited the first day of public viewing. By the end of the publicity campaign more than 27,000 people had visited the home and Northwood Park. On August 13, 1939, Garden Homes held its last public event at the home when James Wilson gave the house’s key to new owners Dr. Mario and Pauline Scandiffio.

Mario and Pauline Scandiffio were just the kind of homebuyers Garden Homes, Inc., wanted to move into Northwood Park. In 1939 Mario Scandiffio (1902-1996) was a Washington pediatrician who was gaining national prominence in a growing battle over the new field of managed
healthcare. His wife, Pauline (1903-1989), was a singer and radio personality who also worked as a Bureau of Engraving tour guide. After spending the first nine years of their marriage living in a Washington apartment, the Scandiffios wanted a home in the suburbs near Dr. Scandiffio’s new Silver Spring medical office; Mrs. Scandiffio, an avid golfer, wanted to live near the Indian Spring Country Club.

The Scandiffios paid for the house with the help of a nine thousand dollar mortgage from First Federal Savings and Loan Association. Over the next dozen years the Scandiffios raised their son and daughter in the home. Daughter Ann Scandiffio recalls walking to nearby St. Bernadette’s Catholic School and playing with other children in the neighborhood. The Scandiffio home had an African-American live-in maid, Lucille — the kids called her “Sha”. Parties were held in the finished basement and Mrs. Scandiffio documented the family’s life in the home with her Crown Graphic camera, developing the photos in the room designed as a workshop.

The Scandiffios lived the suburban ideal until 1952 when Dr. Scandiffio sold his practice and moved the family to Florida. Ads for the home’s sale in the Washington Post noted that it was “Washington’s Official New York World’s Fair Home of 1939.” John L. and John C. Kirby, along with their wives, bought the home in June of 1952. More than fifty years later, the home remains in the Kirby family.
Art Deco: Now & Then
Le Corbusier, the Occult –
and How Art Deco Began

by Barbara Billauer Bailey

“A house is a machine for living,” Le Corbusier, 1921.

La Maison Blanche de le Corbusier (1912)

La Maison Blanche was the first independent project by Swiss architect Le Corbusier. Built in 1912 in La Chaux-de-Fonds, the Swiss hometown of the then Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, it was designed for his parents, but cost overruns and expensive maintenance forced its sale in 1919. Notice the repetitive linearity of the windows and the pattern in the entry-way situated symmetrically beneath the windows.

Otherworldly Influences - Did they Inspire the Art Deco Movement?

Among his other contributions to art, architecture and furniture design, was Le Corbusier’s visionary concept of urban planning and housing development. Using industrial materials, advanced technology, and imaginative design concepts, Le Corbusier was prepared to plan housing developments for populations exceeding three million people – all located in Paris -- housed in 200 story buildings complete with special roof ports for air-transportation. Perhaps exceedingly farfetched in the early 1900s, Le Corbusier’s signature design for this futuristic concept is remarkably like some
of those advanced today. But, even more striking than his housing communities, designed to address radical changes in socio-economics and social policy dawning on the nascent 20th century, was the entirely new way that Le Corbusier looked at space -- as a wholeness, requiring seamless integration between internal and external areas. True, the Bauhaus school had a similar concept, and theirs arose just a few short years after Le Corbusier’s, but long enough to justify awarding Le Corbusier full credit for the idea.

And then there was the manner in which he executed this concept; houses carried on stilts, repetitive use of simple shapes, and the reverence for the right angle and its linear appendages, denuding his creations of anything that would weigh it down, allowing the buildings to feel so light that they might -- with a whiff of air -- be puffed into the stratosphere. His vision was a significant departure from the Art Nouveau design, and he, along with the Bauhaus movement, saw to it that the long, lithe and unadorned lines characteristic of the industrial age replaced the sinewy, curved and draped creations evocative of nature and dance that were the signature of the Art Nouveau movement.

If Le Corbusier’s break with the sinuous curves of Art Nouveau was dramatic in design, it was also abrupt in timing. While his early works were simply prepared and radically different from the aesthetic era that preceded him, once he secured his toehold in the architectural world the leap into plumb lines and pattern that we now call Decoism was short and direct.

So, one might ask, from where did he get his inspiration? What enabled him to translate the design of his ‘purist’ (post-cubist) paintings into grand and satisfying architectural masterpieces? Perhaps it might be said that his teachers afforded some direction. But, that could hardly account for Le Corbusier’s dedicated foray into mastering the merger of Fibonacci numbers and esoteric numerology in design, translating it into paragons of dimensional precision. It has also been argued that although a devout atheist, Le Corbusier was a hanger-on, a seeker, and a curious friend of members of various Free Mason Lodges in Switzerland, France and perhaps England (i.e. an aficionado of the Scottish rite). Whether he was ever inducted as a full-fledged free mason is a subject of dispute, especially given his personal lack of divine belief. Nevertheless, in his magnificent book, “Le Corbusier and the Occult,” (MIT Press, 2009) J.K. Birksted makes a strong case that Le Corbusier was well acquainted with the rites of Freemasonry, with its reverence for the plumb and the triangle, its careful attention to recreating the aura of King Solomon’s Temple and the history of the Israelites en route to depositing the contents of their travelling Tabernacle into its permanent abode in the Temple’s Holy of Holies. As a student of Freemasonry, even if his course of study was in the form of the outsider, he would have come
across the doctrines of the Kaballah and Fibonacci as well as the writings of Masonic Lore. Are these the inspirations for his designs, if not his philosophy? Let’s take a first look at Le Corbusier’s innovative creations and concoctions and then see if we can discern any direct connection with the occult studies that surround the study of Freemasonry.

**The Dawn of a New Aesthetic**

Seven years before the first Bauhaus school opened proclaiming itself the originator of an entirely new aesthetic called modernism, a young Swiss named Charles-Edward Jeanneret, (as Le Corubusier was then called), designed and built a home for his parents. It, too, was based on this modernist conception of art and architecture. Jeannerat was 25 years old at the time, already devout in his antithetical views of the prevailing and pervasive Beaux Arts and Art Nouveau aesthetic.

Two years after La Maison Blanche was completed, Charles-Edward created the concept and design for the *Domino House*, a pre-fabricated system of housing with an “open” plan that eschewed load-bearing walls, thereby allowing maximum flexibility in terms of aesthetics, composition or view. The design incorporated a standardized system of construction using reinforced concrete to provide the structural framework, and consisted of six thin concrete columns that carried two horizontal slabs as its floors. The frame was completely independent of the floor plan, allowing windows to go easily around corners, and other than the staircases that connected the columns and the slabs, nothing else in the construction was fixed.

![The Domino House: Innovation in Mass Production (1914-15).](image)

The Domino House was Le Corbusier’s first response to integrating social utility and architecture. To be built with a novel material, reinforced concrete, the units were conceived as a solution to the World War I housing shortage. Designed for mass-production, the free-flowing design allowed for economical, rapid mass-construction without sacrificing individuality or visual interest.

The name chosen by Jeanneret for his concept was as prescient and as clever as the design. Domino invoked the Latin word for house, “*domos,*” and its design mimicked the domino chip. Seen from above, the columns
would resemble the domino dots, and the zigzag pattern of a group of domino units would resemble the arrangement of the dominoes.

The methodology of the new design was incredibly innovative, incorporating both modern materials, advanced structural concepts and sensitivity to the socio-economic needs of the times and its projected occupants. Interestingly, little reference is made to the innovative design: a stark departure from the fluid and languorous expression of the Art Nouveau motif, Jeanneret substituted an unprecedented clarity of lines that relied on repetition of form, i.e. pattern, to create visual interest. Notwithstanding the beauty of both the concept and the design, the plan was never adopted by the French government and not until 1928 were the principles of economical housing employed.

In 1916, however, Jeanneret was able to incorporate many principles of the construction, if not the design, of the ‘Domino’ construction into the Villa Schwob in La Chaux de Fonds, in Switzerland, one of the first concrete-frame villas in Europe. Despite being the first of his works worthy of publication in prestigious Art Deco journals, in 1918 Jeanneret temporarily left architecture to concentrate on a post-cubist form of art that he called ‘purism,’ (as the then Ludwig Mies concentrated on furniture design). Two years later Jeanneret returned to architecture with a new name, ‘Le Corbusier,’ (a new construction of an old family name), and a new commission, Le Citrohan House.

**Villa Schwob (1916)**

Villa Schwob, created in 1916 relied on reinforced concrete for structural support, one of the first villas to do so. For aesthetic interest, Le Corbusier mixed stark geometric shapes, circles and semi-circles with rectangles, a conceit that later found its way into the modernist (International) school and was to serve as a defining construct of the Art Deco movement.
Surely as splendid an example of the integration of site and structure as any of the Bauhaus school, Le Corbusier’s production predated those of the Bauhaus by at least a half a decade. About this time, Le Corbusier first articulated a refined and incredibly modern philosophy for residential housing, believing a house should provide aesthetic pleasure as well as functional efficiency and healthy surroundings. Seeing housing development as no different from any other form of industrial development, Le Corbusier wrote, “if we erase all rigid notions of the house from our hearts and minds and look at the question from a critical and objective point of view, we will inevitably arrive at the ‘house-tool,’ the mass-production house within everyone’s reach, incomparably healthier than the old (even morally) and imbued with the beauty of the working tools of our daily lives.”

Perhaps in tribute to Le Corbusier, perhaps to rival him, in 1921 Ludwig Mies (of the Bauhaus school, discussed in the last issue of Trans Lux) also added an affectation to his name and did so using the same mechanism, a permutation of a family appellation; in this case relying on his mother’s side for the inspiration, by adding van der Rohe.

By 1923, Le Corbusier had formulated and enunciated a more comprehensive picture of his conception of the coming of age of architecture. In his manifesto ‘Towards a New Architecture,’ he defines the art of architecture as ‘the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together
in light’. Besides providing visual beauty, a major concern in the creation of buildings revolves around whether the exterior, sculptural form should be conferred a priority over the interior spaces – or should the interior functions be enhanced (in importance) to dominate the exterior expression?

In 1929, the two men who have never been called rivals or competitors, produced dramatically similar houses reflecting the themes in Le Corbusier’s book; van der Rohe’s signature Barcelona pavilion (See Bailey on Bauhaus, Trans-Lux, July 2010) emerged at roughly the same time as Le Courbusier’s triumphant creation, “Villa Savoye.”

And while Villa Savoye can be said to be an evolution of Le Corbusier’s prior designs, van der Rohe’s creation appears less an evolution of his own work and more an attempt to compete with the new architectural landscape devised by Le Corbusier, or copy it as a devoted admirer. On the other hand, it may well be that Le Corbusier, who had a history of pilfering designs of competitors, learned of van der Rohe’s design and attempted to best him at it.

Regardless of whether the emergence of van der Rohe’s Barcelona House at the same time as Villa Savoy was a instance of synchronicity, architectural espionage, or raw competition, Villa Savoy was quite a spectacle. Looking different from every angle, it sits on “pilotis,” raised on stilts to separate it from the earth and to make maximum efficient use of the land. As with van der Rohe’s Barcelona house, the design of Savoye House’s is abstract, stripped of ornament, using pure and simple colors, an open floor plan and free-flowing windows. (Le Corbusier used white on the outside, and planes of subtle color in the interior spaces.) However, the two-story construction of Villa Savoy enabled use of dynamic non-traditional transitions between the upper and lower spaces, incorporating architecturally spectacular spiral staircases and ramps. The double floored building allowed for use of roof garden, offering greenery and architecturally
shaped motifs and configurations.

In addition to the architectural features enabled by the two story construction, two other features distinguish Le Corbusier’s pre-eminent contribution to Art Deco architecture from that of van der Rohe: the integration of the central circular form (which allows for the innovative integral garage; the curve of the ground floor is based on the turning radius of the 1927 Citroen) and the internal built in features, including the modular design which are the result of Le Corbusier’s research into mathematics, human proportion, and the occult. In this regard, van der Rohe’s creation appears to be serendipitously beautiful, while Le Corbusier’s creation derives from years of exposure to the numerology of the mystical traditions.
Seven years before Villa Savoy was created, Le Corbusier presented his scheme for a "Contemporary City" for three million inhabitants (Ville Contemporaine). The centerpiece of this plan was the group of sixty cruciform skyscrapers; steel-framed office buildings encased in huge curtain walls of glass. These skyscrapers were set within large, rectangular park-like green spaces. At the center was a huge transportation hub, that on different levels included depots for buses and trains, as well as highway intersections,
and at the top, an airport, imagining that commercial airliners would land between the huge skyscrapers. While a fanciful notion at the time, the premise would easily be satisfied today by substitution of a heliport.

Ville Contemporaine (1922) was designed to house three million residents.

Le Corbusier segregated pedestrian circulation paths from the roadways and glorified the use of the automobile as a means of transportation. As one moved out from the central skyscrapers, smaller low-story, zigzag apartment blocks (set far back from the street amid green space), housed the inhabitants. Le Corbusier hoped that politically-minded industrialists in France would lead the way with their efficient strategies adopted from American industrial models to reorganize society. As one commentator put it, "the proposed city appeared to some an audacious and compelling vision of a brave new world, and to others a frigid megalomaniacally scaled negation of the familiar urban ambient."
These skyscrapers were set within large, rectangular park-like green spaces. Le Corbusier segregated the pedestrian circulation paths from the roadways, and glorified the use of the automobile as a means of transportation. As one moved out from the central skyscrapers, smaller multi-story zigzag blocks set in green space and set far back from the street housed the proletarian workers.

The form of each unit as well as the overall positioning around a central area to service the entire community, the crucial transportation center was a novel concept. Modern transportation, venerated by Le Corbusier, was given tribute by the creation of a central complex, housing depots for buses and trains as well as highway intersections and at the top, an airport. The inspiration for this format had no obvious source in conventional architecture. However, a comparison with the arrangement mandated for the wandering Israelites during their forty year trek in the Sinai is too close to be disregarded. In the overall shape of the layout of the tribes, the inclusion of a central area wherein the essential Tabernacle was situated, and the inclusion of open spaces separating the groups, the design parallels are virtually identical.

Villa Contemporaine

The centerpiece of this plan was a group of sixty cruciform skyscrapers built on steel frames and encased in curtain walls of glass. The skyscrapers housed both offices and the flats of the most wealthy inhabitants.

The Israelite Encampments

A plan of the encampment of the twelve tribes in the Sinai wilderness. Positioned in the same cruciform shape as the basic skyscraper of Le Corbusier’s Villa Contemporaine, the central area was occupied by the tabernacle surrounded by a quadrilinear encampment of the tribe of Levi. This type of map would have been available to devotees of Freemasonry.
In 1925, Le Corbusier proposed to bulldoze most of central Paris north of the Seine and replace it with smaller sixty-story cruciform towers based on his plan for the Contemporary City, placed in an orthogonal street grid and park-like green space. His scheme was met with criticism and scorn from French politicians and industrialists, although they were favorable to the ideas of industrial technology underlying Le Corbusier designs. Nonetheless, it did provoke discussion concerning how to deal with the cramped, dirty conditions that enveloped much of the city.

The proposed city was to be divided into functional zones: twenty-four glass towers in the centre would form the commercial district, separated from the industrial and residential districts by expansive green belts.

The planned city incorporated public recreational places, such as gardens and cafes, playing fields, banks, green areas, and of course the central transportation complex, complete with airport. The complex however, seems to be deficient in parking spaces, a significant omission for its designer, since Le Corbusier was said to be a great fan of the modern contrivance.
The 12 Tribes in the Desert: When making camp, the Israelites were organized in a design that closely resembles the modern cruciform shape. Artistic renditions of the encampments of the twelve tribes were common and dated from the middle ages. Likely, the libraries of the Freemasons would have included many examples, which would have provided different views and vantage points to feed the mind seeking to be inspired.

In the North the tribes of Asher, Dan and Nafatli were camped. In the West were Rachel’s descendants: Menashe, Efraim and Benjamin. Gad, Reuven and Simon (later the warrior contingent) occupied the southern encampment) and Yehuda, Yissacher and Zebulun, all praised for the study of Torah were situated in the East. Surrounding the central tabernacle in the four quadrants were the Levite families of Kehat, Merari, Gershom and Aaron, the priest, and Moses.

A drawing of an individual unit in Villa Contmporaine.
In the 1930s, Le Corbusier expanded and reformulated his ideas on urbanism, eventually producing plans for *La Ville Radieuse* (The Radiant City), a prototype of which he designed in 1935. Perhaps the most significant difference between the Contemporary City and the Radiant City is that the latter abandons the class-based stratification of the former; housing is now assigned according to family size, not economic position. Designed for Stockholm, where Le Corbusier saw only “frightening chaos and saddening monotony,” he dreamed of “cleaning and purging” the city, bringing “a calm and powerful architecture”—referring to steel, plate glass, and reinforced concrete. Though Le Corbusier’s designs for Stockholm did not succeed, later architects took his ideas and according to some critics, partly “destroyed” the city with them.

Between 1931 and 1940 Corbusier undertook a series of town planning proposals for Algiers. The plan had to incorporate the existing casbah, while allowing for growth of the increasing population. The resulting Obus Plan was a variation on the Ville Radieuze, adapted for a very specific culture and landscape. It comprised four main elements: an administration area by the water in two slab blocks, convex and concave apartment blocks for the middle classes up on the slopes above the city, an elevated roadway on a north-south axis above the casbah and a meandering via-duct with a road on top meandering down the coast. In these ventures, while scaled down and hence more practical, Le Corbusier’s efforts took on a coldness, perhaps the result of a lack of spiritual component, an omission which seems to have been remedied in his later designs.
In 1958, Le Corbusier helped create Poem Electronique, the first electronic-spatial environment to combine architecture, film, light and music in a total experience that coordinated functionality in time and space. Under Le Corbusier’s direction, Architect Iannis Xenaki’s concept and geometry designed the World’s Fair exhibition space, adhering to strict mathematical functions. Music enhanced the dynamic, while light and image projections conceived by Le Corbusier illuminated the space. (Source: Marc Treib, Space Calculated in Seconds, Princeton, 1996, p. 3)
The architectural aesthetic of the building with its fluid triangular shape is a far departure from Le Corbusier’s standard design. One must again wonder from where he gained his inspiration.

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that in one of the Free Masonry Lodges with which Le Corbusier may have had contact, the following illustration surfaces, along with a detailed description of the Tabernacle, its placement within the central area of the encampment, and the design of its internal features, including the use of curtains of goat hair, and the following description. (courtesy: The Web of Hiram)

“The Lodge and Its Decorations: Within the Court, the Tabernacle Mishkan was set in the center. It was a double tent, the foregoing word particularly applying to the inner curtains, and Ahel, and to the outer curtains of goat’s hair.”

Illustration in a book on Scottish Rite Freemasonry, depicting the Tabernacle that travelled with the Children of Israel, and identifying it as the prototype for Masonic lodge design.

In 1928, just as Mies van der Rohe began concentrating on building design, Le Corbusier tried his hand on furniture design, producing designs that very much resembled the ones van der Rohe had created three years earlier. Le Corbusier’s innovation: the use of animal (goat?) hair as a fabricating material.
Inspiration for Savoy House, the predicate for Modernism and the International Style:

Perhaps the most innovative and aesthetically satisfying of Le Corbusier’s creations is the Savoy House. Raised on stilts, one senses that but for the anchoring core that tethers it to the earth, it might float off into deep space. Again, one wonders – from whence came the inspiration?

Below is a drawing of a Bedouin tent, contained in a text housed in the schools of Scottish Freemasonry which would have been available to Le Corbusier. Following the illustration, the text discussed how the Freemasonry lodges should be designed, drawing upon the Tabernacle for inspiration.

“A modern rendering of Savoy House, highlighting the cantilevered construction of the upper story, the flow-through channels underneath, and the columns anchoring the second floor to the earth. Very much like the tent, which uses thin rope to accomplish the same task, with a very similar “feel,” both dwellings incorporate external space into the artistic design.
Fibonacci Numbers and Numerology:

Fibonacci numbers represent the pairing of two sequential numbers, that, when added, provide the next number in the Fibonacci continuum: Thus 1+2 yield Fibonacci number 3, which when added with its immediate predecessor, 2, yields 5, the next Fibonacci number. When the five is added to its predecessor in the sequence, or 3, it produces the next Fibonacci number, 8, which, in turn, when added to its Fibonacci predecessor produces 13. The relationship of the two Fibonacci numbers, hovers at 1.61, depending on the size of the sample, (the value of one standard deviation). But more than its mathematical significance, the relationship of the two numbers conveys a sense of artistic perfection. Even today, in quotidian design, the concept makes its appearance; just look at 5x8 cards, and when designers talk of a perfectly proportioned room that is what they mean, a length to width ratio of approximately 1:6.

Le Corbusier’s study of Fibonacci numbers and use in his projects (for spatial proportion) is well documented, and may have served as the basis for his rejection of the Beaux Arts design. As Le Corbusier himself noted, “The curse of architecture are the compasses… of the Beaux Arts, indifferent of measures and dimensions…“ But this is hardly a novel concept or contribution, as knowledge of the golden mean and its aesthetic perfection was well known, utilized by Leonardo da Vinci, amongst others for hundreds of years. Nevertheless, this interest likely introduced Le Corbusier to the relationship of numbers, shape, and meaning, concepts found in many occult/mystical or religious schools.

Likely Le Corbusier would have been fascinated with the perfection of rectilinear shapes created by the Master Masons (under the direction of Hiram Abiff), who, in using their plumbs and T-squares built Solomon’s Temple to perfection. In the closing pages of his book on modular design, Le modulator, Le Corbusier sums up his approach:
“The compass of the geometrician, able to execute, to determine, to conjure up between points, at will, an imprisoning circle, or a projection towards infinity, skilled in the play of geometry, opening the door to the boundless and perilous joys and symbols and metaphysics, sometimes bringing a solution, sometimes a temptation to escape. A dangerous tool, depending on the nature of the spirit that guides the hand. I would classify the results in this way: The spirit of geometry produces tangible shapes, expressions of architectural realities: upright walls, perceptible surfaces between four walls, the right angle, hallmark of balance and stability. I call it spirit under the sign of the set square…. The compasses (not those on the fifty-franc note!) explain all that is limitless, esoteric, Pythagorean, and so forth.”

Ultimately, Le Corbusier’s work gradually changed to reflect his growing disillusionment with the machine. Even then, it appears he drew on mystical sources for inspiration. In his 1947 book, When the Cathedrals Were White, he referred specifically to the Kabbalah, and surely would have been familiar with its tree of life paradigm and structure. Perhaps this explains the presence of a sketch that approximates the Sefirot at the end of his own book on the Chapel at Ronchamp, itself a “vessel of light” par excellence.

So there you have it. Did this fascination inspire the transition from the curvilinear pattern and design of the Art Nouveau/Beaux Arts aesthetic to veneration of the right angle, the straight line, and the repetitive use of simple shapes such as rectangles, circles, and triangles, or even the more complicated spiral, venerated by other similar occult groups? Does the rather abrupt appearance of an aesthetic relying on these features, produced by one of the earliest contributors to the Art Deco movement, coupled with his knowledge and interest in the occult world of religion, hint to us that the Art Deco aesthetic is a product of the mystical design of the Universe?

Next issue: Le Corbusier’s influence: Now

About the Author

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recognized a kindred spirit in Rockwell and formed significant collections of his work. The exhibition showcases 57 major Rockwell paintings and drawings from these private collections and is the only venue for this event. Now through Jan. 2, 2011. http://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/archive/2010/rockwell/

“The Civilian Conservation Corps Experience, 1933–1942” - The photographs and paper documents in these cases show what life was like for the young men who enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), specifically the conservation work they engaged in and their daily life in camp. This collection marks the 75th anniversary of the CCC at the National Museum of American History Archives Center.

Cityscapes Revealed: Highlights from the Collection at the National Building Museum.— This first-time survey of the National Building Museum’s collection will offer detailed drawings, rare, early-20th-century photos, and original building fragments from national historic landmarks. http://www.nbm.org/Exhibits/upcoming.html


“Designing Tomorrow: America’s World’s Fairs of the 1930s” – This National Building Museum exhibition will explore the popularization of modernism and the association between design, technology, and industry at the fairs between 1933-1940. Nearly 100 million Americans witnessed visions of a brighter future at six world’s fairs across the nation. Through July 2011. http://www.nbm.org/exhibitions-collections/upcoming-exhibitions.html

Now Showing—Outside Washington, DC

The Kelly Art Deco Light Museum. This establishment claims more than 400 light fixtures including wall sconces, chandeliers, and table lights, from 1928-1938. Permanent. http://www.thedecomuseum.com/

Masterpieces of French Art Deco – The largest exhibition of works from the Met’s extensive holdings in French Art Deco fills a large gallery with nearly 150 examples of art, furniture, wallpaper, and decorative objects. The exhibit includes Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, Jacques Dunand, and Jean Puiforcat. The Met has been collecting in this area since the 1920s when pieces were acquired from the designers in Paris. Ongoing. www.metmuseum.org

Underground Gallery: London Transport Posters, 1920s–1940s -- After World War I, striking modern posters began to transform the stations of London’s underground railway system into public art galleries. The posters were designed by artists like László Moholy-Nagy, Zero (Hans Schleger), and Abram Games. This installation will present more than 20 posters. July 28, 2010-Feb. 28, 2011 http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1096

Upcoming—Outside DC

Coming Attractions

ADSW Events

December 3, 2010—Holiday Party & Fred Astaire Presentation

February 5, 2011—Black & White Ball

Other Events in the Washington, D.C. Area


Dec. 18, 2010 – The Smithsonian American Art Museum will present Saturday Evening Post’s Christmas Stories in conjunction with the “Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg” exhibition. Rockwell’s images were on the cover of many Saturday Evening Post holiday issues and illustrated stories for the holiday season. http://www.americanart.si.edu/calendar

Dec. 23, 2010 – Chaise Lounge will perform “Christmas Swing” at Blues Alley. The band is five local jazz musicians and vocalist Marilyn Oldier. http://www.chaiseloungenation.com

Dec. 31, 2010 –
- WAMU 88.5 and Hot Jazz Saturday Night will ring in the new year with A Hot Jazz New Year’s Eve live from the Omni Shoreham Ballroom with host Rob Bamberger. The evening will feature the live music of Barbara Rosene and Her New Yorkers. They will play tunes from the 1920s-1940s. WAMU is celebrating its 50th anniversary and Rob Bamberger is marking his 30th as the host of Hot Jazz Saturday Night. Omni Shoreham Hotel special rate available for evening. Rate code WAMU. 1-800-THE-OMNI (1-800-843-6664) or http://wamu.org/50-years/events.php
- Doc Scantlin and His Imperial Palms Orchestra will bring their lively show to the National Press Club Ballroom on New Year’s Eve. The evening will include open bar, hors d’oeuvres, party favors and champagne toast at midnight. http://www.press.org/swing
- The Kennedy Center will present A Jazz New Year’s Eve with The Jon Faddis Jazz Orchestra of New York with Nnenna Freelon. Stay for the balloon drop in the Grand Foyer. http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar

Jan. 16, 2011 – The National Gallery of Art will present violinist Bruno Nasta and Ensemble. They will feature music by Gershwin, Joplin, and Milhaud. This concert will be presented in honor of From Impressionism to Modernism: The Chester Dale Collection. http://www.nga.gov/programs/music/

February 13, 2011—The Retropolitans will perform “Dawn of a New Day: World’s Fair Songs of the 1930s” at the Jordan Kitts Studio, Merrifield, Virginia. Contact Jim Linz (jimlinz@verizon.net) or Alex Hassan (alexsara@noveltypiano.com) for details/reservations.

(Continued on back cover)
Events Outside the Washington, D.C. Area

“DecoDence: Legendary Interiors and Illustrious Travelers Aboard the SS Normandie” -- The largest, fastest and most glamorous of the so-called “floating palaces” of the early and mid-20th century, the SS Normandie was an ocean-going ambassador of French culture, design and stylistic prowess. The exhibition at New York’s South Street Seaport museum features original interior works by artists that beautified her decks, showing visitors just why Normandie captured the imagination of the world before her tragic end in 1942. The displays also showcase original furnishings, rare passenger photographs, video footage, voyage logs, uniforms, fashion accessories, and commemorative items from Normandie’s maiden voyage. A defining roster of Art Deco masters that worked on her fittings, furnishings, and accoutrements includes René Lalique, Hermès, Jean Dupas, Jean Patou, and Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann. Now through January 2011 http://www.southstreetseaportmuseum.org

Now Showing—Washington Area


TruthBeauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845–1945 -- This exhibition at the Phillips features more than 120 photographs from the Eastman House collections, created by celebrated photographers such as Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, Julia Margaret Cameron, and Alvin Langdon Coburn. TruthBeauty illustrates Pictorialism’s desire to elevate photography. The Phillips is the final stop on the international tour of the exhibition, organized by George Eastman House and Vancouver Art Gallery. Now through Jan. 9, 2011. http://www.phillipscollection.org/exhibitions

A Photographic Journey of the Ambassador’s Daughter: Moscow, 1937-38 – The Hillwood Estate, Museum and Gardens presents approximately 30 large prints recounting day-to-day life in the Soviet Union, which have been enlarged from pieces in Emlen Knight Davies’ private collections and photo albums. The images include street views of Moscow, pastimes with Russian friends and fellow diplomats and expatriates, and life in Spaso House, the U.S. ambassador’s residence in Moscow. Now through May 29, 2011. http://www.hillwoodmuseum.org/

Barron Hilton Pioneers of Flight – This National Air and Space Museum Gallery highlights aviation during the 1920s and 1930s. Objects on display include Fokker T-2, the airplane that made the first nonstop, coast-to-coast flight across the United States; the Douglas World Cruiser Chicago, which completed the first round-the-world flight; a Lockheed Sirius flown by Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh and a Lockheed Vega flown by Amelia Earhart. Ongoing http://www.nasm.si.edu/exhibitions/gal208/

1939 -- This small exhibition explores the way Americans used entertainment to distract themselves during a turbulent year when the country was recovering from the Great Depression and World War loomed. The National Museum American History features Dorothy’s ruby slippers from the Wizard of Oz and images from Life Magazine. Ongoing http://americanhistory.si.edu/exhibitions/exhibition.cfm?key=38&exkey=1565

“Telling Stories: Norman Rockwell from the Collections of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg” – This exhibition at the Smithsonian American Art Museum explores the connections between Norman Rockwell’s iconic images of American life and the movies. Two of America’s best-known filmmakers -- George Lucas and Steven Spielberg --