

America Reacts to the Paris Exposition

By Jim Linz

In 1923, President Hoover declined an invitation to participate in the 1925 Paris Exposition, stating that America *had* no modern art to display. While Hoover's assessment of the state of art in the United States may have been a bit overstated—just check out the stunning Art Deco covers and illustrations in *Vogue* magazines from the teens and early twenties or some Hollywood sets from the early 1920s—it fairly described the state of home decoration.

In her 1939 book *Modern Interiors: Today and Tomorrow*, Emily Genauer noted that America was still undergoing a post war building boom in 1925 but that

“the new houses were being rapidly filled with the same taupe-mohair, three-piece, overstuffed suites which had pocked the face of America for more than a decade. Grand Rapids manufacturers found that they could not turn out enough of that cheap, over-elaborate, poorly constructed and even more poorly-designed stuff known to the trade as ‘borax,’ or Bronx Renaissance to meet the demand for it. There were many persons not yet aspiring even to this mire of mohair. These were still in the golden-oak era.”

Genauer, the editor of the fine and decorative arts sections of the *New York World-Telegram*, had even harsher words for the tastes of the well-to-do:

“The more affluent minority were the slaves of the simon-pure period decorators. No tudor oak refectory table was used in a room whose simple, light walls would set off the better the dark, rich beauty of the aged wood. No, the walls had to be lined with ancient, worm-eaten paneling carted over from some manor-house in England. The draperies could be no fresh and colorful modern versions of a traditional English chintz, because dark, red velvet or heavy crewel work were more ‘correct.’ ”

Although the United States did not exhibit at the 1925 Exposition, it sent a contingent of young designers, many of whom had been educated abroad, to Paris to tour the exhibits. Although their reports were enthusiastic, American furniture manufacturers initially had little interest in the new modern movement. By 1927, however, major department stores put together exhibits of interiors similar to those that had created such a stir at the Paris Exposition. Public reaction to the department store exhibits was so strong that manufacturers could no longer ignore the modern style. Ms. Genauer reports that

“They determined, at last, to do something about this new style, and not a few of the more daring among them did put out some furniture they considered pretty fine modern. But

they knew nothing about new forms, and it was not surprising that the great portion of the American public would not accept the strange monstrosities put out by the manufacturers in their blindness. Then, when the new ‘modernistic’ furniture did not at first go over, they were inclined to dismiss the whole thing as a fad.”

Rejecting the efforts of the major furniture manufacturers, the designers who had been to Paris began to create their own designs and have them executed by small workshops. In addition, they imported European pieces. The designers, many of whom had previously been employed by Hollywood or Broadway as set designers, became known as industrial designers.

Although their designs initially emulated European designs, slowly an American style emerged. French Art Deco pieces tend to be massive with their bulkiness exaggerated by the use of exotic veneers. The American designed pieces became smaller and simpler, often using undecorated walnut or lacquer. In addition, the early skyscraper set-backs popularized by Paul Frankl gave way to designs so straight and geometrical that they took on “packing-case contours.”

Modernism in America remained, however, primarily for the well-to-do. Although Manning-Bowman made some stunning Art Deco coffee services and cocktail sets in the late 1920s, these sets were not intended for middle America. Some of the sets sold for \$95. Similarly, Chase Brass and Copper began marketing Art Deco giftware in 1931, but the early designs were too expensive for a nation just beginning to emerge from the Great Depression.

In some respects, Hoover was wrong and America was at the forefront of the development of the Art Deco movement. That development, however, largely took place in the fantasy world of Hollywood. In 1921, Joseph Urban became the first American art director to use modern décor, using modern furnishings in the Marion Davies film *Enchantment*. That same year, Natacha Rambova designed modern sets for *Camille*. Urban and Rambova again used modern sets the following year in *The Young Diana* and *Salome*, respectively.

The development of art deco through Hollywood set design is not surprising in that many of the men and women who would become America's foremost industrial designers during the late 1920s and 1930s began their careers in set design. These include Norman Bel Geddes, Russel Wright, Henry Dreyfuss, and Lurelle Guild. Guild even enjoyed a brief career as a Hollywood actor.

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The movies helped raise American's consciousness about the emerging and evolving style. Following the Paris Exposition, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's 1928 hit *Our Dancing Daughters*, starring Joan Crawford, became the first Hollywood picture to feature all art deco sets. The sets were designed by Cedric Gibbons.

The movie palace itself also helped introduce the public to the art deco style. Although the most lavish theatres were built in the major cities, even small towns got a taste of the new style as the popularity of the talkies created unprecedented demand for new theatres.

Fan magazines also helped flame the public's interest in Art Deco with elaborate layouts on the homes of the Hollywood stars, many of which were decorated to recreate the feel of the Hollywood set.

Although the movies piqued the public's interest in the new and evolving style, they basically took them on a short visit to a fantasy world. Art Deco home furnishings remained beyond the reach of most Americans. That was to change, however, with the opening of the Chicago "A Century of Progress" Exposition in 1933.

At the Chicago Fair, millions of Americans were introduced to mass produced art deco home furnishings as they visited the row of model homes. Emily Genauer noted that

"...the country-wide popularity of the new style dates from the time they came upon it accidentally in Chicago, admired its simplicity, its directness, its straight simple lines and chunky forms, and most of all, its patent livableness."

In many respects, it was the opening of the 1933 Chicago Century of Progress Exposition that signaled the transition of the Art Deco movement in the United States from hand-crafted furniture and decoration to machine-made furniture and decorative items.

The rest is history. Both Chase and Manning Bowman introduced new, lower-priced, lines of chromium-plated giftware in 1933, followed in 1934 by Kensington, and in 1935 by Revere. Low price lines of glass, pottery, and other giftware were also introduced. Mail order firms like Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward introduced new lines of inexpensive furniture in "waterfall" designs. The rails made the latest designs available even in rural America. America's love affair with modern design had begun in earnest.