

Deco Bookshelf

Review by Jim Sweeney

After you spend some time looking at Ave Pildas' photos of movie palaces, you come to appreciate the "palace" part ("Movie Palaces: Survivors of an Elegant Era," Hennessey and Ingalls, hardcover, \$29.95). The elaborate decorations, lavish materials and massive spaces seem to belong in a castle. The photos mostly cover the United States west of the Rockies, with a heavy emphasis on California theaters. This book is a reissue; it was originally published in 1980, so the information on theaters shouldn't be considered current.

For example, in this book Houston's Alabama Theater is still operating. Michael Putnam's more-current book says the Alabama is now a bookstore (see review elsewhere in this issue).

The photos mix close-ups of decorative details and wider views of interiors and facades. They also show that movie palaces weren't limited to a few big cities. There are great examples from smaller cities and towns, such as the Avalon and Laurelhurst in Portland, Ore., or the Warner in Erie, Pa.

The book uses photo essays to compare details. An essay on the sign on the Pix Theater in Hollywood shows how it looks as it cycles through its color changes, and also in daylight. Another essay examines the design scheme of Mann's Chinese Theatre, including its incredibly detailed chandeliers.

The essays also show how much variation and elegance could be put into features such as ticket booths, terrazzo floors, doorways, statues, fountains, murals, even exit signs.

Although the book focuses on the gorgeous details of movie palaces, it doesn't ignore changes to theaters. Pildas notes of one photo of a terrazzo floor that the flooring that fronted this Los Angeles theater outlasted the theater.

Another Los Angeles theater, the Orpheum, now shows movies in Spanish, reflecting the changes in the city's population. Pildas says that the age of building movie palaces ended with the start of the Depression. However, the elegance, size and excellent acoustics of many movie palaces earned them new lives as symphony halls or live theaters.

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