

DECO DISCOVERIES: ART DECO TEHRAN

By Clive Foss

If you go to Iran expecting to find fierce bearded mullahs, thugs toting Kalashnikovs and angry crowds shouting 'death to America' you'll be disappointed. In fact, the people are incredibly friendly and hospitable, the food is good, hotels comfortable and transport works. You'll hardly see soldiers or policemen on the streets – at least not the kind who wear uniforms. You will see fabulous ancient ruins, elegant mosques with intricate tile work, colorful bazaars and some really exotic cities. You probably won't be looking for it, but you can also find some impressive Deco of the 1930s, at least in Tehran.

For centuries, Iran lived an isolated and traditional life in the buildings typical of the Islamic world. Growing European influence in the nineteenth century introduced new forms of architecture and politics, including a constitutional revolution in 1906 that prefaced two decades of turmoil. Finally in 1925 a tough general took over and was crowned as king with the name Reza Shah. He was a fervid modernizer, determined that Iran should catch up with the West in very way. That meant the uprooting of traditional society by a powerful centralized government that issued constant new laws and reforms.

Since a modern country needed a modern setting, Reza ordered broad new boulevards and squares in Iran's cities and brought in foreign architects (and sent Iranians to study abroad) to implant a suitable new image. As a result, the latest styles, especially the Moderne and its variations spread through Tehran, with monumental public buildings setting the tone. Some like the Ministry of Justice or the National Bank at the Bazaar, both by Iranian architects who had studied in Europe, feature the stripped-down classicism typical of 1930's.



Ministry of Justice

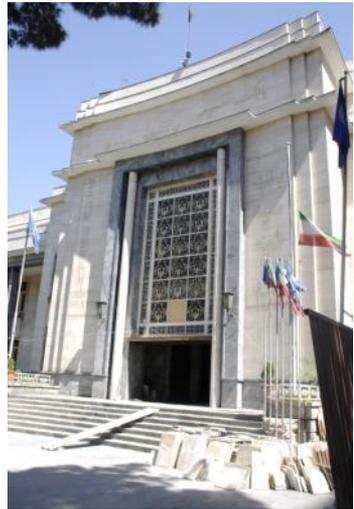


National Bank at the Bazaar

Others, like the School for Orphans with its casement windows and port-holes, were more innovative. Its architect, Vartan Avanesian, had worked with the modernist Henri Sauvage in Paris. The elegant variation called Regency Moderne also appears.



School for Orphans



Regency Moderne

Most of the University of Tehran featured the Moderne style, but unfortunately it's strictly off limits to outsiders. In addition, many private commercial buildings in Tehran's old downtown area, display all the characteristics of the Streamline Moderne.



Reza Shah was a bogus monarch, really a military dictator without any legitimacy. He therefore turned to Iran's ancient past – when it ruled the whole Near East as none have since – to bolster the image of the regime and implicitly to identify it with a glorious tradition. He patronized excavation of the ancient capital Persepolis as well as the study of Persian art, and favored a style for public buildings that incorporated elements of ancient architecture and decoration. The ancient Achaemenids are prominent in the facade of the ministry of Foreign Affairs, with its reliefs of Darius' troops, the god Ahura Mazda and the bull-head capitals but even here Art Deco creeps in: notice the tall pilasters that typically emphasize the vertical and the stepped openings over the windows. It wouldn't be out of place in Los Angeles.



So, if you find yourself in this not very dangerous country, look round and you'll see Deco. You can avoid Tehran's horrific traffic and frightening pedestrian crossings (the cars never stop) by taking the subway directly to the buildings illustrated. Get off at Imam Khomeini Square.