

DECO DISCOVERIES: DECO FOR THE PRIESTS IN BRITTANY

By Clive Foss

Brittany, in the far west of France, has many attractions for the tourist: a varied landscape, rugged coasts, antique small towns with medieval churches and quaint brightly-painted half-timbered houses, outstanding seafood, crepes and cider and - if you like that sort of thing - vast German submarine bases from the Second World War. Most of its towns are extremely appealing, but not the large industrial Saint Brieuc on the north coast. Its traffic, whether on the crowded streets or the motorway that cuts through the town centre, its unattractive concrete blocks, and its general lack of charm and things to see, encourage the traveler to move on rapidly. One guidebook even describes it as 'worth avoiding'. In spite of all that, deco-philosophes will have a pleasant surprise and find a real deco gem here. The first treat will be in the centre, in the form of a splendid Streamline Moderne furniture store (I couldn't learn its history), but the real prize lies about a mile to the east, on the rue de Genève. This is the Grand Seminaire.



At first sight, the Seminary looks rather forbidding, its grey granite walls suggestive of a medieval castle, but the rays that radiate from the cross of the main door and the spirals attached to it give a hint of something special.



The surprise comes immediately in the tall vaulted chapel, bursting with color on the walls below the windows and the pillars between them, tempered by a floor of black and white and the rather sober furnishings. Everything is Deco - from the shape of the arches that support the roof to the marble pavement. Most spectacular are the altar, with its peacocks perching on stylized spiral vegetation and the geometric exuberance of the Stations of the Cross, each one with a different design.

But don't neglect the pavement or the interior doorway that combines the medieval with the deco. There's more to see in the crypt chapel, with its colorful frescoes and pavement.



The effect is overwhelming and makes one wonder what's the story of this place. It was built in 1929 by Georges-Robert Lefort (1875-1954), the leading Breton architect of his day, responsible for buildings in a variety of styles, including another Deco gem, the railway station of Dinan, east of Saint Brieuc, built in 1932. The mosaics and pavement were the work of Isidore Odorico (1893-1945) whose father and uncle came to Brittany from northern Italy to found a firm that specialized in mosaics of all kinds - in the Roman or Venetian style, using marble, enamel or gold - as well as marble pavements. They were responsible for many masterpieces of Art Deco; the firm had a long life, functioning until 1978.

The building and its decoration fit into the artistic and political movements of the time. Brittany is a very distinctive part of France. Its inhabitants, the Bretons, speak a Celtic language closely related to Welsh, for their ancestors migrated from Britain at the time of the Anglo-Saxon invasions and the

fall of the Roman Empire. The region was independent, under its own dukes, until 1532 and, though long joined with France, has often gone its own way, notably during the Revolution when it was a diehard centre of royalist resistance. In modern times, Breton nationalist movements started in the late nineteenth century and gained considerable momentum after the First world War. Part of this was the result of poor treatment of Breton soldiers, who often spoke little or no French since they came from a largely rural, isolated region. A desire to assert and validate a Breton identity led to the foundation of a cultural movement called Ar Seiz Breur, the Seven Brothers, which aimed to produce a modern Breton art, encompassing all aspects of the arts and crafts from architecture to typography. They didn't simply want to preserve or revive the traditional, but to make use of modern techniques, materials and styles to produce something distinctively Breton, but recognizably contemporary. Since the movement was growing in the 1920's Art Deco could provide the framework of modernity. At the same time, devout Catholicism was a major facet of Breton life in a country that was resolutely anti-clerical. A general shortage of priests led to the foundation of seminaries, as at Saint Briec.



The mosaics should be seen in this context, making use of traditional Celtic motifs (often derived from Ireland) in a deco medium.

Even the pavement bears a message, for the black and white it uses were the colors of the nationalist Breton flag, known familiarly as the Gwen ha Du the White and Black. In other words, there's more than meets the eye in this chapel; but what the eye does see is really worth the visit.

