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| Art Deco |
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| Art Deco was the predominant decorative style in Europe and the United States between the world wars, before spreading internationally and reaching its climax in the mid-1920s. It is known primarily for its opulence in materials and sense of elegant glamour, luxury, and prosperity in its design. Art Deco’s alternating geometric vocabulary and reliance on stylized natural forms, including flowers, animals, and female figures in the decorations, were applied to objects in every area of the decorative arts, including furniture, jewellery, graphics, bookbinding, glassware and ceramics. |
| Art Deco was the predominant decorative style in Europe and the United States between the world wars, before spreading internationally and reaching its climax in the mid-1920s. It is known primarily for its opulence in materials and sense of elegant glamour, luxury, and prosperity in its design. Art Deco’s alternating geometric vocabulary and reliance on stylized natural forms, including flowers, animals, and female figures in the decorations, were applied to objects in every area of the decorative arts, including furniture, jewellery, graphics, bookbinding, glassware and ceramics.  In the United States, its ascendant stepped forms were ideally suited for the early developments in urban skyscraper architecture. Like the Art Nouveau, which it replaced in popularity, Art Deco was an all-encompassing style in which all aspects of an interior and exterior were coordinated in design. Industrial designers embraced the streamlined curve of Art Deco in the conception of many consumer products including the automobile and household products, which were often made from Bakelite and other new plastics.  Several factors influenced the development of Art Deco in Paris in the first decade of the twentieth-century. Founded in 1901, the Société des Artistes Décorateurs worked to promote the most talented designers in Paris to reinforce the French position at the forefront of increasingly competitive European markets. This impetus was largely in response to the exhibits at the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, where the Art Nouveau style was seen as having become too commercialized and diluted. The Société’s efforts to organize an international exposition were delayed because of World War I. When finally realized, the Art Deco style was seen at its best expression in the pavilions, ensembles, and objects on view at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* [International Exhibition of Modern and Industrial Decorative Arts], held in Paris in 1925, and from which the name was eventually applied to describe the style on view.  In 1903, leading Parisian artists, architects, and designers, similarly recognizing the need to exhibit together, founded the Salon d’Automne. The group was responsible for introducing Parisians to the work of Paul Gauguin and other leading artists, including Paul Cezanne, Puvis de Chavannes, Odilon Redon, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec among others. In 1905, the Salon d’Automne introduced the work of the Fauves — Henri Matisse and Andre Derain — whose liberated and abstract use of colour and bold forms designated them as ‘wild beasts.’  At the same time, the formal experiments of Cubism led to an interest in geometric form and abstraction in many realms of art and design. This is seen in the exploration of pure colour and non-representational forms in the works of Robert and Sonia Delaunay, and in shapes and forms that were soon applied to clothing and objects, including automobiles. The Futurists also explored dynamic movement, speed, and the machine aesthetic.  The *Ballet Russes* was one of the most important influences on the development of visual culture in the 1910s. Brought to Paris in 1909, the performances by Serge Diaghilev’s company and his talented collaborators, including the designer Leon Bakst, astonished audiences and inspired designers with their enveloping and intoxicating mixture of ornament, pattern, and colour in spectacles evoking exotic or far-away realms in the dancing, sets, costumes, and staging.  Meanwhile, the appeal of the exotic was further fuelled by France’s vast colonial territories, inspiring the use of primitive or tribal forms from Africa; an interest in new techniques and aestheticized surface qualities from lacquer and ceramic glazing from Asia; and the use of rare and exotic woods and other materials, often from the colonies, such as sharkskin, tortoiseshell, ivory, and semi-precious stones for inlays. The Art Deco synthesis of elements, fusing geometric and exotic forms, luxurious materials, and heightened aestheticism, also incorporated varied forms that reflected popular interests at the time. Zigzags, stepped pyramidal forms, and sunbursts were inspired by the Near Eastern and Aztec examples, and the interest generated by the recent discoveries in Egypt in the 1920s, including King Tutankhamun’s tomb. Art Deco designers mined the French styles from the past for traditional elements that contributed a sense of Classical restraint with elegant proportions and stylized natural motifs of floral garlands and cornucopias. Travel, adventure, and the contemporary interest in exotic places were themes applied to graphics and advertising using streamlined or sophisticated Art Deco forms.  French Art Deco in particular is characterized by the exquisite craftsmanship of the object by designers using the most luxurious wealth of materials, as seen in the ensembles of Émilie-Jacques Ruhlmann and the designers Süe et Mare. The collaborations between artists, designers, and fashion designers led to some of the most innovative and interesting examples of Art Deco ensembles, such as the tribal theme décor made by Eileen Gray, Paul Iribe, and Pierre Legrain for the successful couturier Jacques Doucet or the textile designs by the artist Raoul Dufy made for the designer Paul Poiret. More moderate versions of these atmospheric, total interiors were soon available from the design studios affiliated with the leading department stores in Paris.  The popularity of Art Deco waned as interest grew in mass production and industrial materials, such as tubular steel furniture, which lacked ornamentation and was suited to the ethos of form following function that began to influence the direction of modern design from architects such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. The disregard for cost or practicality in the materials and luxurious designs of Art Deco eventually led to its demise, an end that was inescapable with the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929 and escalating political tensions throughout Europe in the 1930s.  The most triumphant crowning examples of Art Deco architecture are the skyscrapers in New York City, including the Chrysler Building (1928*–*30), and the Empire State Building (1929*–*31). Geometric, stepped and pyramidal forms in each evoke the streamlined, machine aesthetic that prevailed. They serve as a dynamic reminder of the Art Deco, the final design style of the twentieth-century that was conceived of as a complete and all-encompassing program uniting architecture, arts, and the applied arts. |
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