

# Art Deco Style (1920-1940)

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**Art Deco, sometimes referred to as Deco, is a style of visual arts, architecture and designs that first appeared in France just before World War I.**



A creative but short-lived movement, Art Deco not only influenced the architecture of most American cities but had an impact on fashion, art, and furniture, too. From 1925 to 1940, Americans embraced Art Deco as a refreshing change from the eclectic and revivalist sensibilities that preceded it. The style takes its name from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs held in Paris in 1925 as a showcase for new inspiration. The style was essentially one of applied decoration. Buildings were richly embellished with hard-edged, low-relief designs: geometric shapes, including chevrons and zigzag patterns; and stylized floral and sunrise patterns. Although some buildings utilized expensive hand-crafted decoration, others made do with machine-made repetitive decorations. To keep costs down, ornamental treatment was often limited to the most visible parts of the building. Art Deco projects produced dynamic collaborations between architects, painters, sculptors, and designers—sometimes resulting in complete Art Deco environments like Old Miami Beach, Florida.



In its day, some of what we now refer to as Art Deco was often called Moderne, or Art Moderne, a term used to describe the most advanced design ideas of the 1930s up to the end of the second World War. Being close cousins, Art Deco and Art Moderne shared stripped-down forms. But Art Moderne had a:

- 1) Horizontal rather than vertical emphasis,
- 2) Rounded rather than angular corners,
- 3) Minimum Surface ornamentation.



Art Deco was first applied to public and commercial buildings in the 1920s. Although individual homes were rarely designed in the Art Deco style, architects and developers, especially in Greater Washington, DC, found that the style adapted quite well to apartment buildings. Most of these buildings are still in use, a testament to the city's richly varied architectural history.

For all its panache, Art Deco was immensely practical in execution. For projects on a tight budget, the simple box could be decorated with motifs and embellished with appendages that made a conceptually rudimentary structure appear fashionable and up to date. Visual interest could be further enhanced by stretching linear forms horizontally and vertically throughout the building. This was frequently done with bands of brick, canopies, or copings.



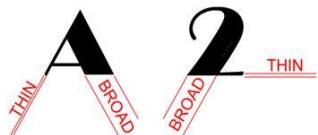
## ART DECO 1924 – 1940

Two typical Art Deco patterns are seen here below. Art Deco patterns tend to have:

Distinctive circular patterns.  
Bold Straight Lines.  
Subtle use of colour and shade.  
Often look rather abstract.

Font Style (below)  
Art Deco even has its own  
style of writing (font). This is  
distinctive by the contrasting  
broadness and thinness of  
parts of the same letter, with  
the colour being black.

Art Deco  
1924 to 1940



Architecture was first and foremost considered to be decorative - ornamental and beautifying. Buildings, cinemas, railway stations, etc. were all embellished with quintessential Deco patterns like zigzags, sunbursts, Egyptian motifs and similar geometric patterns all in the name of beauty. Post-war society very quickly fell in love with the style, as it was a representation of all that was modern, luxurious and beautiful. The twenties of the last century was a time of joy and hopefulness and the masses embraced this new look with open arms. It was symbolic of the strong economy and it inspired hope for a prosperous future.

**Art Deco**, also called Modern Style. It is a movement in the decorative arts and architecture that originated in the 1920s and developed into a major style in western Europe and the United States of America during the 1930s. Its name was derived from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, held in Paris in 1925, where the style was first exhibited. Art Deco design represented modernism turned into fashion. Its products included both individually crafted luxury items and mass-produced wares, but, in either case, the intention was to create a sleek and anti traditional elegance that symbolized wealth and sophistication. Though it draws heavily from antiquity, art deco was considered ultramodern at the height of its popularity, with some of the first deco designs coming from the edgy Bauhaus School in Germany. The style combines the circular, trapezoidal and rectangular motifs of the Machine Age with the high-gloss finishes and glamorous black-and-white color palette of the silver screen.

The distinguishing features of the style are simple, clean shapes, often with a “streamlined” look; ornament that is geometric or stylized from representational forms; and unusually varied, often expensive materials, which frequently include man-made substances (plastics, especially Bakelite; vita-glass; and ferroconcrete) in addition to natural ones (jade, silver, ivory, obsidian, chrome, and rock crystal). Though Art Deco objects were rarely mass-produced, the characteristic features of the style reflected admiration for the modernity of the machine and for the inherent design qualities of machine-made objects (e.g., simplicity, planarity, symmetry and unvaried repetition of elements).

Among the formative influences on Art Deco was Art Nouveau, Bauhaus, Cubism. Decorative ideas came from Egyptian and early classical sources as well as from nature. Characteristic motifs included nude female figures, animals, foliage, and sun rays, all in conventionalized forms. Most of the outstanding Art Deco creators designed individually crafted or limited-edition items. They included the furniture designers Jacques Ruhlmann and Maurice Dufrène; the architect Eliel Saarinen glass and jewelry designer Rene Lalique, fashion designer Erte.

The Rockefeller Center in New York (especially its interiors supervised by Donald Deskey; built between 1929 and 1940), the Chrysler Building by William Van Alen, and the Empire State building by Shreve, Lamb & Harmon are the most monumental embodiments of Art Deco. Although the style went out of fashion in most places during World War II, but by the late sixties there was a renewed interest in Art Deco design. Into the 21st century Art Deco continued to be a source of inspiration in such areas as decorative art and jewelry design.



## **Overview**

A creative but short-lived movement, Art Deco not only influenced the architecture of most American cities but had an impact on fashion, art, and furniture, too. From 1925 to 1940, Americans embraced Art Deco as a refreshing change from the eclectic and revivalist sensibilities that preceded it. The style takes its name from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925 as a showcase for new inspiration. The style was essentially one of applied decoration. Buildings were richly embellished with hard-edged, low-relief designs: geometric shapes, including chevrons and ziggurats; and stylized floral and sunrise patterns. Shapes and decorations inspired by Native American artwork were among the archetypes of the Art Deco lexicon.

Although some buildings utilized expensive hand-crafted decoration, others made do with machine-made repetitive decorations. To keep costs down, ornamental treatment was often limited to the most visible parts of the building. Art Deco projects produced dynamic collaborations between architects, painters, sculptors, and designers—sometimes resulting in complete Art Deco environments like Old Miami Beach, Florida. In its day, some of what we now refer to as Art Deco was often called Moderne, or Art Moderne, a term used to describe the most advanced design ideas of the 1930s through to the end of World War II. Being close cousins, Art Deco and Art Moderne shared stripped-down forms. But Art Moderne had a horizontal rather than vertical emphasis, rounded rather than angular corners, and little surface ornamentation. Art Deco was first applied to public and commercial buildings in the 1920s. Although individual homes were rarely designed in the Art Deco style, architects and developers, especially in Greater Washington, DC, found that the style adapted quite well to apartment buildings. Most of these buildings are still in use, a testament to the city's richly varied architectural history. For all its panache, Art Deco was immensely practical in execution. For projects on a tight budget, the simple box could be decorated with motifs and embellished with appendages that made a conceptually rudimentary structure appear fashionable and up to date. Visual interest could be further enhanced by stretching linear forms horizontally and vertically throughout the building. This was frequently done with bands of brick, canopies, or copings. A 1984 book, *Washington Deco* by Hans Wirz and Richard Striner, catalogs over 400 Art Deco buildings in the Washington area. Two examples are on

Capitol Hill: the former Kresge Store at 666 Pennsylvania Avenue S.E., built in 1936 and recently expanded (the Art Deco-style frieze on the building's facade was part of the 1980s renovation of the building; the pattern for the frieze was taken from a 1930s fabric); and the Penn Theater at 650 Pennsylvania Avenue S.E., built in 1935. Although the Penn Theater itself was demolished, the marquee and a portion of the facade have been incorporated into the new building. Additional examples of Washington Art Deco are the Kennedy-Warren Apartments at 3133 Connecticut Avenue N.W., the Hecht Company warehouse on New York Avenue N.E., and the sign of the former Greyhound Bus Terminal on New York Avenue N.W. In classic Art Deco, rectangular blocky forms were often arranged in geometric fashion, then broken up by curved ornamental elements. But always the aim was a monolithic appearance with applied decorative motifs.

## **Materials**

Art Deco materials included stucco, concrete, smooth-faced stone, and Terracotta. Steel and aluminum were often used along with glass blocks and decorative opaque plate glass.

## **Roof**

Art Deco designers adorned flat roofs with parapets, spires, or tower-like constructs to accentuate a corner or entrance. Decorative curiosities such as chimneys were added to further enhance the design.

## **Windows**

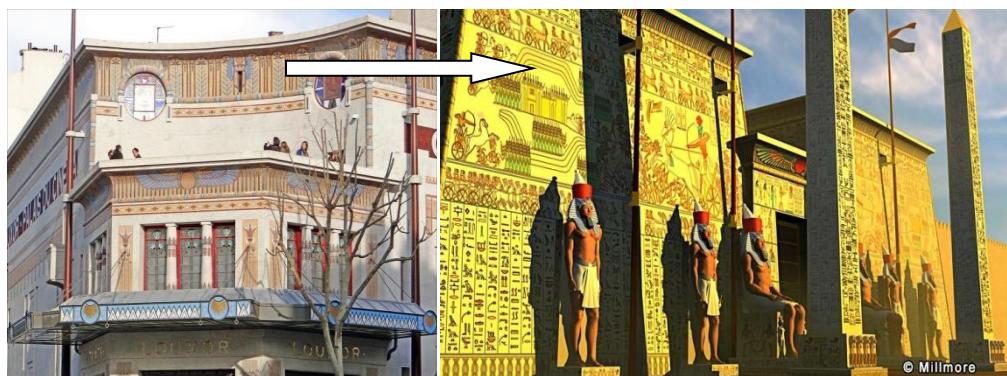
Windows usually appear as punctured openings, either square or round. To maintain a streamlined appearance for the building, they were often arranged in continuous horizontal bands of glass. Wall openings are sometimes filled with decorative glass or with glass blocks, creating a contrast of solid and void forms while admitting daylight. Many large apartment buildings found aesthetic success with decorative embossed spandrel panels placed below windows. The Kennedy-Warren Apartments is an example.

## Entrance

Doorways are sometimes surrounded with elaborate pilasters and pediments, and door surrounds are often embellished with either a convex decoration or fluting (a concave decoration). The quality and extent of the decorative motifs vary by project and designer.

## Egyptian Art Deco Motifs

The style was partially inspired by artifacts discovered in 1922 in King Tut's tomb, and many art deco buildings include the repeating designs and vivid color common in Egyptian artwork.





## Key Elements of the Style:

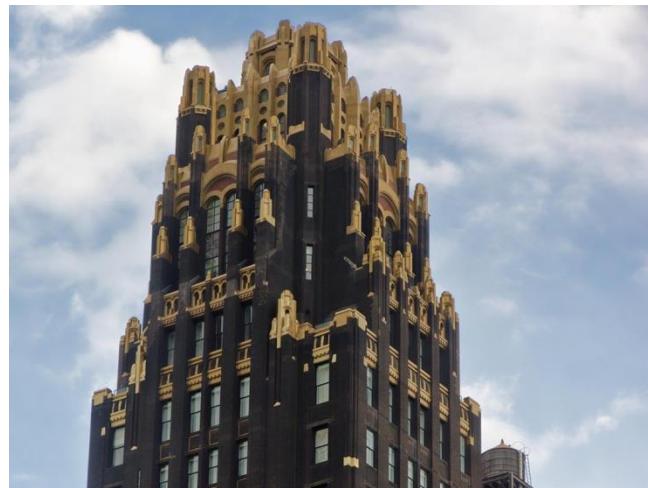
- **Flat roofs.**
- **Smooth walls.** The walls of art deco homes are often made of smooth stucco and have rounded corners.
- **Bold exterior decorations.** Buildings in the style were often decorated with zigzags, swans, lilies and sunrise motifs.
- **Experimentation with interior materials.** Art deco designers used "new" materials such as glass block, neon, chrome, mirrors and opaque glass panels.

## **Famous Examples of the Style:**

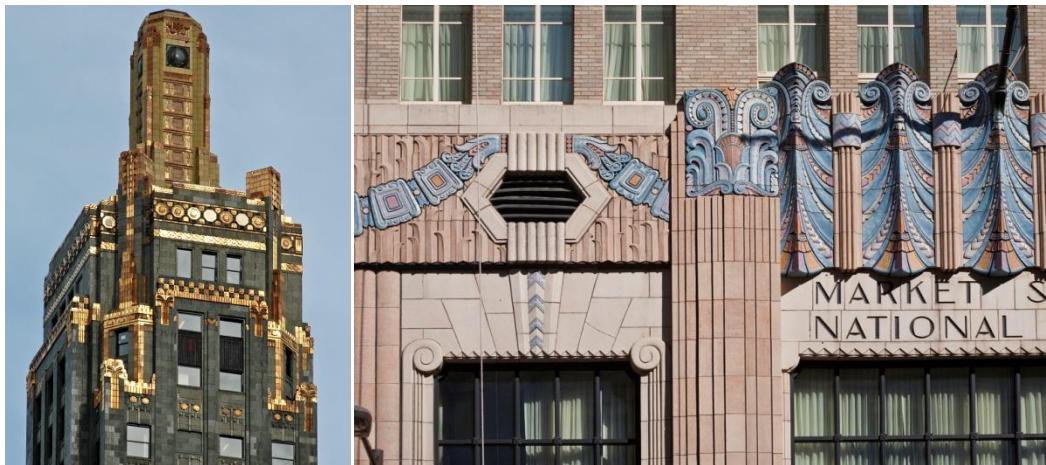
- **Chrysler Building.** Perhaps the most famous example of art deco architecture is the Chrysler Building in New York City. Just a few blocks to the north, the **Empire State building** is another art deco gem.
- In Chicago, the **McGraw Hill Building** and the **Powhatan Apartments** epitomize art deco style.
- The hotels in **Miami's South Beach** -- and newer buildings throughout South Florida -- combine deco lines with pastel colors.



## **The Top Art Deco Buildings**



**The American Radiator Building**



### **The Carbon Tower**