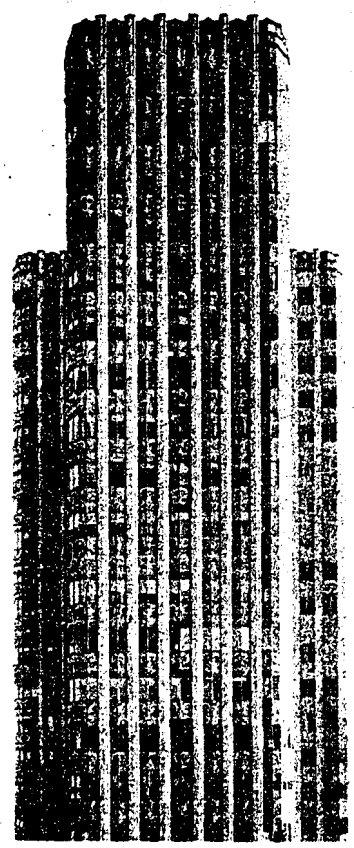
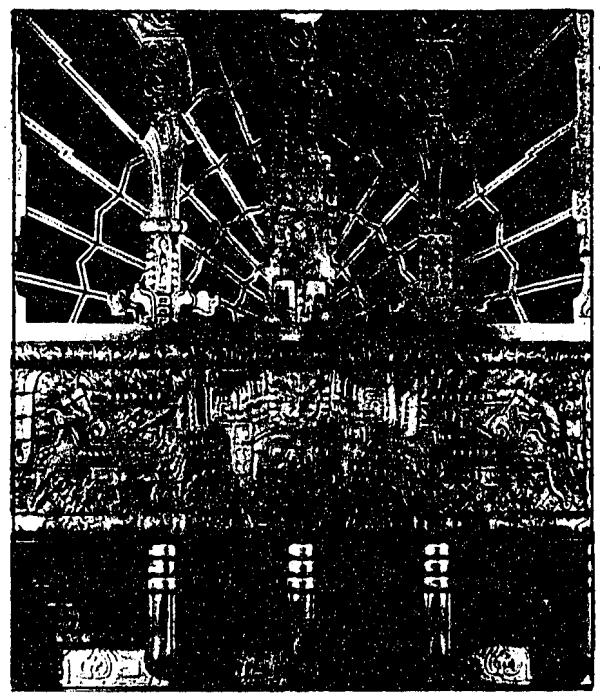
Design

THE SKYSCRAPER STYLE





San Francisco's 450 Sutter Building, 1930, by J. R. Miller and T. L. Pflueger. Bottom, a detail of the lavish Mayan-Moderne lobby decoration.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

Don't sell Art Deco short. It is more than high camp or current chic, more than tasseled cigarette cases and streamlined statuettes, more than a passing vogue for one in a series of sentimental stylistic revivals. It has come out of the closet (literally) to be legitimized and dignified, for art history scholars to write about and textbooks to record.

As Style Moderne—the most accepted of a number of sobriquets of which Art Deco is actually a subdivision—it dominated 20th-century art and life for the two decades of the nineteen-twenties and thirties. An almost universal design passion or phenomenon at that time, it produced some of the most notable monuments of a uniquely American contribution to architectural history, the skyscraper. Among the buildings shown on these pages are masterpieces of the skyscraper style. In all of these cases, skyscraper style was a synonym for Style Moderne.

Style Moderne is about to take its place in the chronology of serious art movements. But just how, is still the question. Interpretations vary. Some call Style Moderne the *dernier cri* of the great French decorative arts tradition. Others define it as an initial foray into modernism, as important, in its way, as the more generally accepted doctrine of machine art. In its entirety, Style Moderne spanned the period between the two World Wars. It is now a respectable 50-some years old, a time of creaking middle age. Middle age, of course, is when hindsight begins to work.

If no other proof of its stylistic validity were offered, the fact that it pervaded every visual aspect of existence from monumental architecture and the decorative arts to clothes, jewelry, furniture, interiors, toasters and automobiles should be enough. Style *is*; it is not just advanced theoretically.

Style Moderne was, in fact, both style and lifestyle. Its geometric and curvilinear products ranged from Cartier's to Woolworth's, from skyscrapers to souvenirs, from superb to awful. The flapper posing in her Poiret gown beside a Packard *touring* was its fashionable apogee; the housewife, in her abstractly patterned, linoleum-floored kitchen furnished with the latest chrome breakfast set, opening the door of a streamlined Frigidaire, was equally involved in its expression.

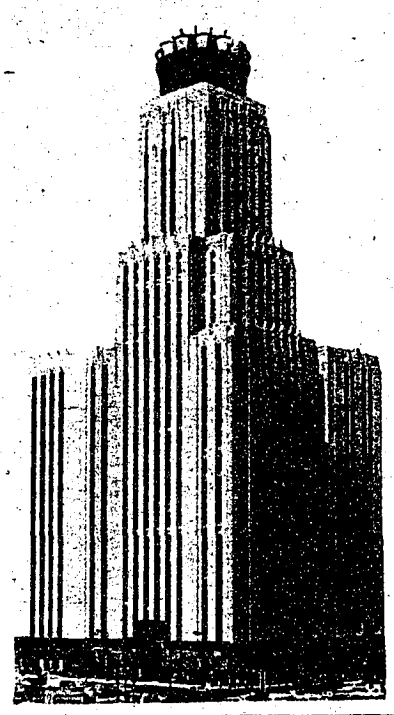
It was the scent, the essence, the spirit of an art-historical moment. It was elegantly packaged Lelong perfumes, extravagant Hollywood sets, the clairvoyant Futurama, the great public rooms of the great hotels, Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles, Hugh Ferriss's New York, publications in stylish Bernhard Gothic type, omnipresent glass brick and *torchères*. The "trickle down" from high life and style was a raging torrent to other levels.

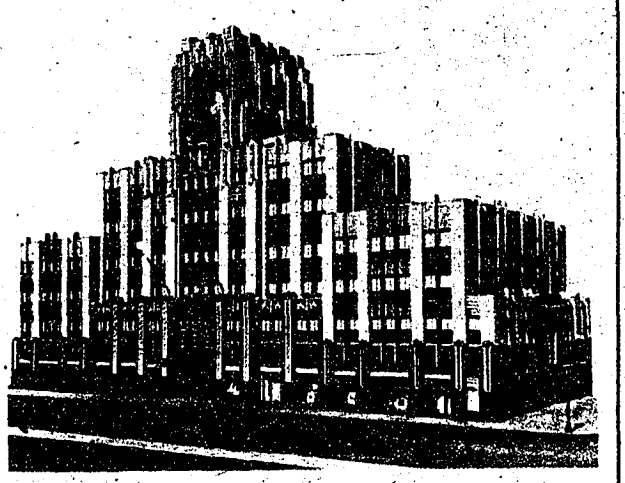
In architecture, Style Moderne's forms clothed the technological wonders of 20th-century building with a pure and often naive romanticism. Effects were deliberately vertical or horizontal, with frequent massing of connecting or overlapping projections. Arrangement could be axial and pyramidal, or calculatedly asymmetrical, with ribbon curves. Smoothness was sought; suavity was suggested. Decoration was flat, extensive, and frankly applied to the surface. It was all called "modernistic."

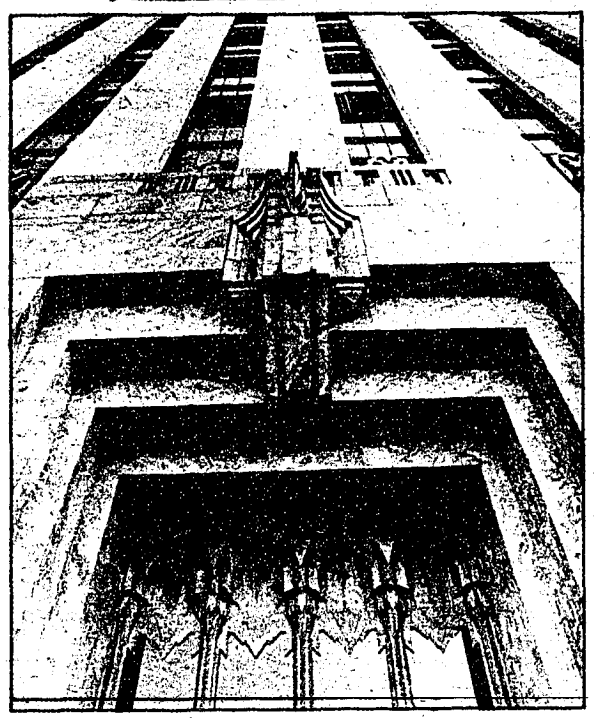
Motifs had an extraordinary range, from pure geometry to neo-neo-classical and jungle-Mayan. From the angular, ziggurat look favored in the twenties and a conditioning love affair with the car, the train and the ocean liner (champagne sailings and Art Deco interiors), there was a transformation to rounded, encasing forms in the thirties, inspired by the airplane. Speed and streamlining were enthusiastically espoused.

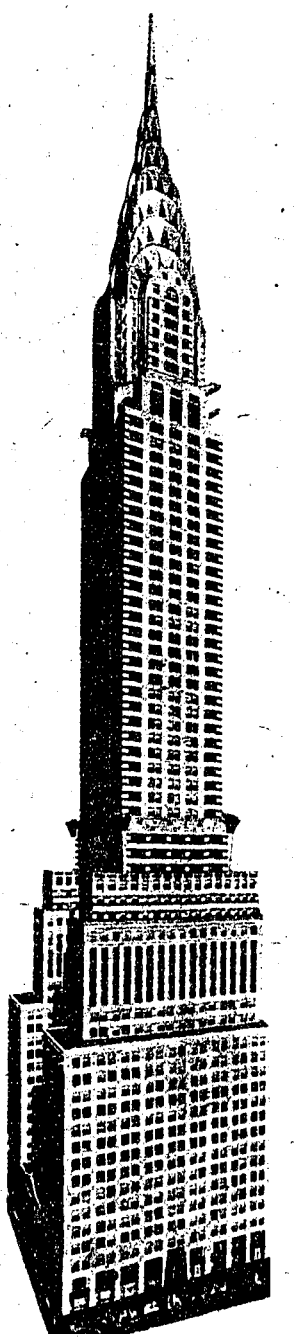
Influences could not have been more diverse. They came from Russian constructivism and the twenties' vogue for the ballet in Paris, from Dutch De Stijl, Expressionist and Cubist art, from Mackintosh and the Glasgow School, the Vienna Secession, and the cult of the machine.

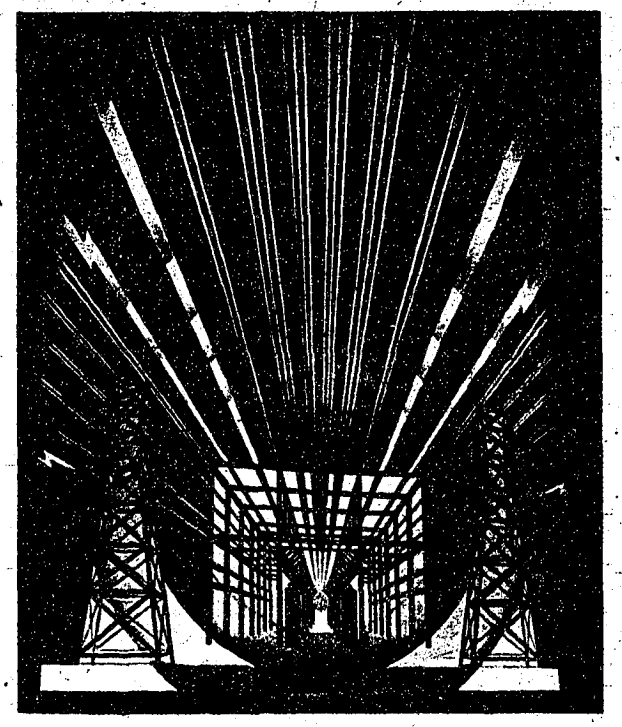
Just enough years have passed to see the movement whole again. And the time has come to analyze it historically and philosophically, to determine its roots and its rationale, to understand its revived appeal and to evaluate its products.











Minneapolis's Northwestern Bell Building, 1931, by Hewitt & Brown. Bottom, a section of the building's "modernistic" sculptured facade with details in marble, stone and metal.

Manhattan's Chrysler Building, 1930, a masterpiece of the Style Moderne by William Van Alen. Top, a detail of tapering, sunburst tower.

Syracuse's Niagara Mohawk Building, 1932, by Melvin L. King. The massive horizontal pyramid, is a typically exuberant example of Art Deco drama and decoration (vignette, bottom).

The recording and sorting process has begun with the work of such scholars as David Gebhard, Bevis Hillier and Elayne Varian, with exhibitions at the University of Southern California in Santa Barbara in 1969 and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1971. The big blast will take place at New York's Finch College later this year, where Elayne Varian is preparing an exhibition of American architecture of the period that will offer definition and perspective.

Recognition of these buildings is increasing, and recognition is essential. Like Victorian monuments for more than half a century after that era ended, Style Moderne buildings have largely been considered expendable. Acceptance has been retarded just enough so that much of what is still standing will be lost through the uncertainty of landmark commissions and uninformed lay responses.

Unfortunately, collectors, who have been in the vanguard of recognition, don't collect buildings; they collect things. And "official" architectural history has sucessfully blackballed the Style Moderne. It has been virtually written off by those historians for whom the International Style, with its pure machine esthetic, insistent functionalism and denial of decoration, was the only valid movement at the time.

The chief danger, in fact, is its present fad status. Style Moderne's present supporters are too preoccupied with trivia and kitsch, too unwilling (or unable) to differentiate good from bad, the amusing or mediocre from the masterwork. It will be dropped just as quickly as it has been picked up by those looking for the latest esthetic kick (although object prices will never drop again).

Another danger is the obvious one that these buildings exist in a speculative society, at the mercy of real estate and other commercial values. Part of the unparalleled Cincinnati Union Terminal (Fellheimer and Wagner,1933) is already being demolished; the Art Deco mosaic murals by Weinold Reiss have just been rescued. The McGraw-Hill Building (Raymond Hood, 1930), a unique blend of Moderne and International *(Continued on Page 66)*

Art Deco

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Style, stands empty in New York, waiting for West Side real-estate values to improve (when an office-building upsurge will probably seal its fate).

With notable exceptions, the buildings of the style are held to be landmarks only by a small band of enthusiasts who are considered a little bit crazy, like steam-locomotive buffs. Still, their taste does not seem quite so esoteric when some of the most famous landmarks of the Style Moderne are listed: in New York, for example, the Chrysler, Empire State and Daily News Buildings, Rockefeller Center and Radio City Music Hall; in Michigan, the work of Eliel Saarinen at Cranbrook, and in Detroit, some of the buildings of Albert Kahn.

The range is enormous. The Nebraska State Capitol is Style Moderne; so are the embellishing details of Boulder Dam. The Niagara Light and Power Company of Syracuse, N.Y. and similar buildings across the country are largely unappreciated examples. The style can be culled from public works to private houses, from the Pop scene to Frank Lloyd Wright.

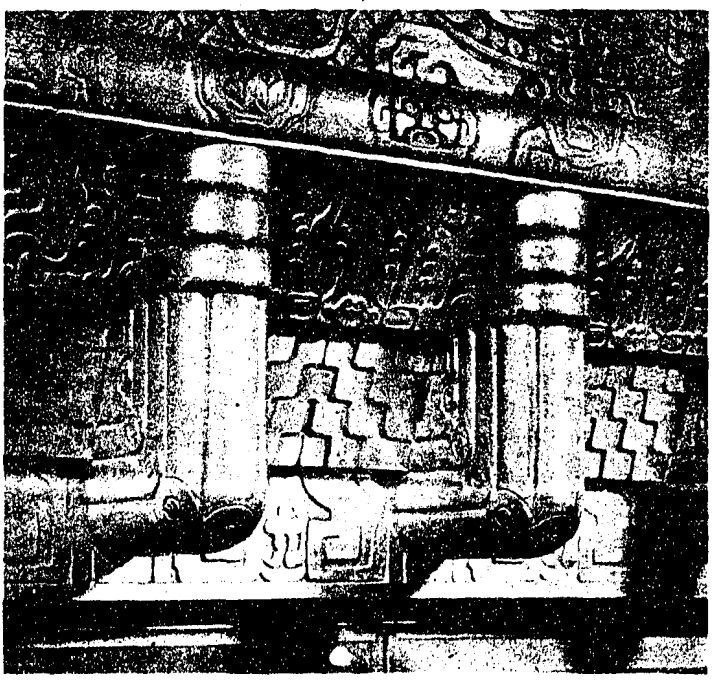
The trouble is that so little is properly identified, and people "buy" (i.e., respect) labels. Appreciation follows institutionalization. Surely no movement has been the subject of greater labeling confusion.

Style Moderne, as generally accepted by historians and critics, covers everything of the entire period in architecture and the decorative and industrial arts. Art Deco, a more object-oriented label, derives from the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industrielles Modernes* in Paris in 1925, which set the vogue for the style, and in a sense, defined it. Sticklers consider Art Deco appropriate for only the first, nineteen-twenties phase of the style.

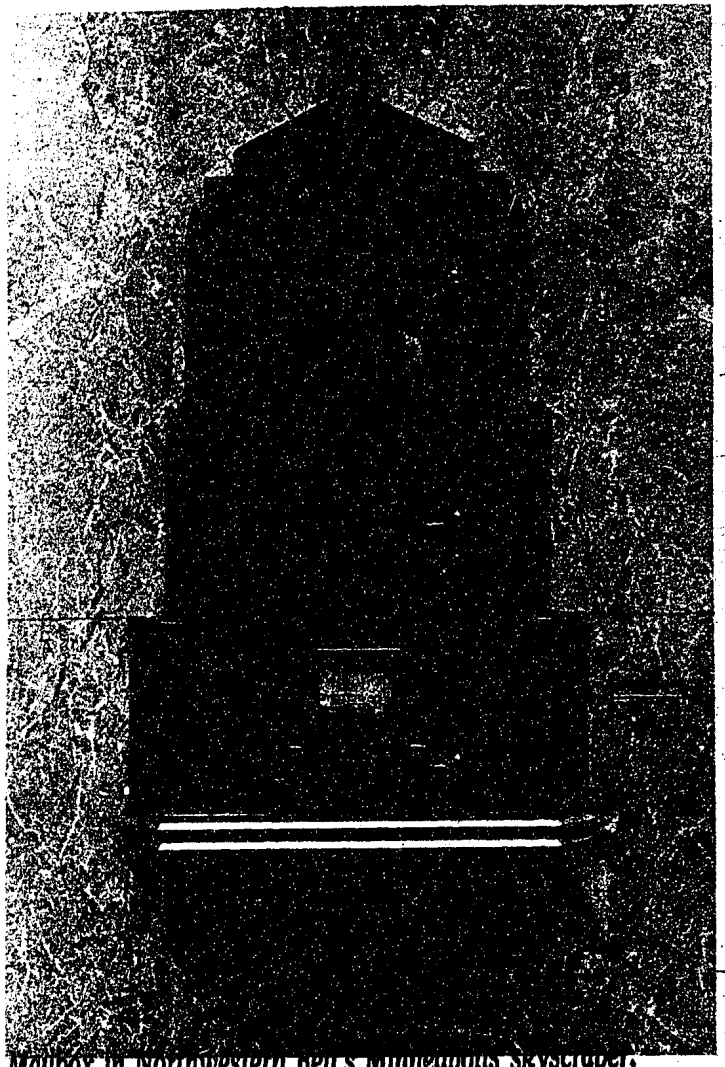
Modernistic was the common name in the United States. It is still the right name, historically, for the period, although it is persistently misused as a synonym for modern. Superrefined categories have already been invented by the experts—Zigzag Moderne for the twenties, and Streamlined Moderne for the thirties.

The original Paris Art Deco style was just that: a beautiful, primarily decorative style, modern because it broke with the past for a simplified vocabulary of details and forms. There was no revolution in underlying structure. In furniture and accessories, it relied on all of the traditional crafts of wood and metal work, and the finest materials, such as exotic inlays and lacquers.

When this was transferred enthusiastically to the United States, it was reinterpreted and much debased. It was merchandised for a wide, department-store public. American industrial designers added objects of mass production. In all cases, whether the products were from art, craft or industry, the style's propon-



Detail of exterior of main entrance of Pflueger's skyscraper building at 450 Sutter Street, San Francisco.



Mailbox in Northwestern Bell's Minneapolis skyscraper.

ents were telling themselves a lot of fairy tales about the machine.

The twenties and thirties were very conscious of being the "machine age," and the machine was seen with a blissfully naive optimism as the agent of change, the salvation of the world. To marquetry was added the new glamour of bakelite and vitriolite and glass, both clear and black. The combination of the plastic and the esoteric was common: zebrawood and linoleum, fabrikoid and cork, gumwood and aluminum.

The Chrysler Building gloried in its stainless steel trim and cadmium-plated spire. Hard, lustrous surfaces were popular. If things weren't made by machine, they were expected to look as if they had been. It was art as symbol rather than product of the industrial process.

In the United States, the Chicago World's Fair of 1933 wrapped the Moderne up spectacularly as "a century of progress," from the play of floodlight beams on striped and striated planes and flat foliated friezes to the inflated vacuity of streamlined neoclassical sculpture. But the American skyscraper says it best—and most definitively.

It created a kind of nostalgic avant-garde, it was the "new" safely tied to the past, chic, romanticized and updated, symbolically expressive of an attitude, as much as of an art. Every detail from elevator doors and lighting fixtures to terrazzo floors, was consistently exotic or elegant. But those cities that Hugh Ferriss delineated in soft pencil—great Beaux Arts arrangements of massed blocks and spires—were a dream that never came to pass. We have its isolated monuments.

Why, then, has the Style Moderne not been taken seriously? How has so much, by so many, been so conspicuously ignored? The obvious answer is that it was in conflict with another expression of modernism, born and matured during the same period, and espoused by the day's leading intellectuals: The International Style, which produced great architects and great polemicists, including Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius. Both their polemics and practice dictated a functionalist, ornament-free, machine esthetic. It was war between the two expressions from the very beginning. The decorative approach, as opposed to the functional-structural approach, had to be treated as a lie. Historians of the "approved" modern movement adopted an attitude of dismissal and distaste.

The schism persists today. It seems both vestigial and unnecessary. The real architectural revolution of the 20th century has undeniably been the work of the International Style. With its technological base and more rigorous vision it produced the environment and esthetic-changing masterworks. But the Style Moderne deserves its proper and illuminating place in cultural history.

Today, the lady who carries the nifty Art Deco compact that she found in a thrift shop, and "adores" her ziggurat black enamel bookcase with the streamlined radio on top, can also be assured that the Chrysler Building and Radio City Music Hall are immortal. Land values permitting, of course. ■