Design Notebook

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The queens that ruled seas and set styles.

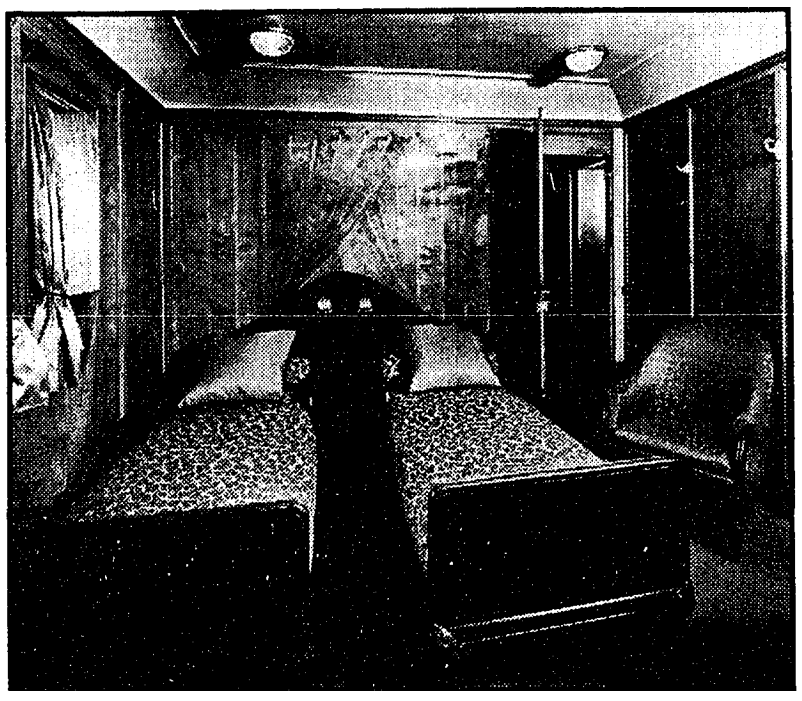
OF the great design triumvirate that represented "modernism" to the poets and prophets of the first part of the 20th century — the ocean liner, the train and the plane — two are already obsolete. The trans-Atlantic liner and the transcontinental train have become objects of extreme nostalgia; the ocean liner is, in effect, extinct. And yet it was to these three icons of movement, change and speed that architects like Le Corbusier and critics like Sheldon Cheney fashioned hymns of praise. They became the symbols of freedom and mobility that the century craved.

At the same time, the ocean liner was the last gasp of an age of leisure and elegance, soon to be sacrificed to the speed and efficiency of air travel. It was a glorious anachronism, and those who experienced it have glorious memories of a special mix of conviviality, adventure, grand luxe, ocean air and haute cuisine that started with champagne midnight sailings. The mid-ocean suspension of time and reality is an experience unique in the history of travel and hedonism.

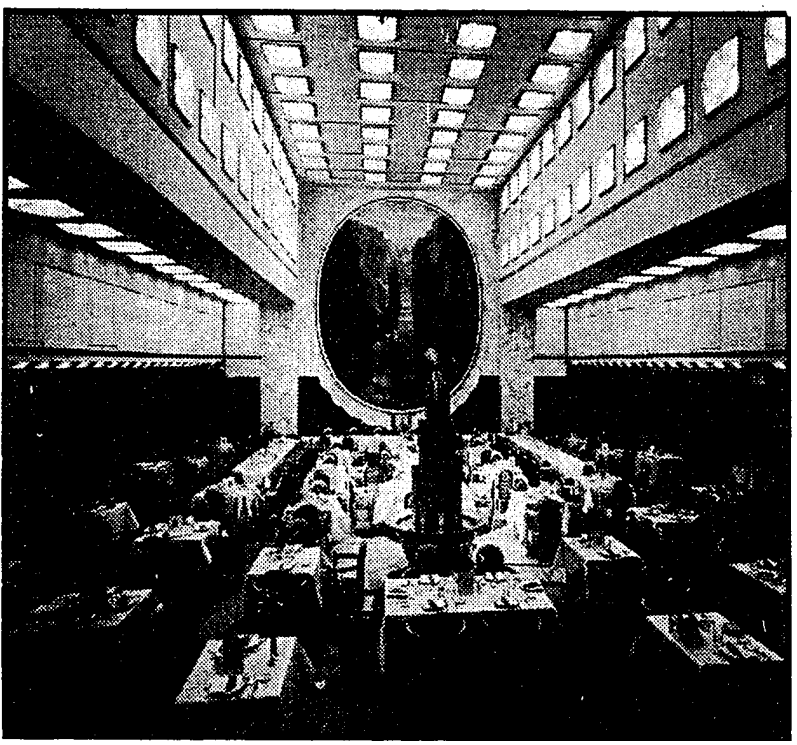
In retrospect, it becomes clear that the ocean liner was one of the unique design objects of the 20th century. It is that significant aspect of its history that is being celebrated in an exhibition called "The Ocean Liner: Speed, Style, Symbol," that will open on Jan. 22 at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2 East 91st Street, and run through April 6, under the direction of Richard B. Oliver, curator of Contemporary Architecture and Design.

Symbol and style are never far apart. In the heyday of the big ships in the 1920's and 30's, the future was very much in fashion. The ocean liner was a supersymbol of a sleek new world, a mechanical marvel that could be nicely romanticized into a rich Art Deco setting for Old World pleasures. It was the synthesis of Art and Industry and Escoffier.

Before long, the suave spirit of those shipboard salons invaded everything from Hollywood movies to department store furnishings. The railings and decks of Le Corbusier's seminal Savoy House, the steel tubing, indirect lighting and extraordinary mix of exotic wood veneers, lacquers, marbles, plastic and aluminum called "modernistic" at the time, became the universal standard of chic. Much was owed to what became known as le style paquebot.



The bedroom of a first class suite on the Paris in 1921



Modernistic first class dining room on the Ile de France in 1927

The Cooper-Hewitt show is a thoughtful analysis of the design aspects of the ocean liner, which are divided into three areas: the technological developments of the hull, superstructure and propulsion systems responsible for speed and size; the complex, innovative planning required to accommodate passengers, crew, services and machinery; and the style and decoration of the interiors, meant to provide not only comfort and luxury but an exceptional image and ambiance.

Mr. Oliver's catalogue is wonderfully informative, and the prints, photographs and artifacts in the show are an endless delight. For more expansive reading, there are two splendid books, John Maxtone-Graham's "The Only Way to Cross" (Macmillan, 1972), and "The Sway of the Grand Saloon" (Delacorte, 1971), John Malcolm Brinnin's "social history of the North Atlantic." For Mr. Oliver's purposes, the story of the great liners starts in 1892 with the Lucania, which, he tells us, "set new standards for technological advance and decorative opulence."

He traces the technology from compound steam engine to steam turbine engine, notes the changes from wood to steel and aluminum and describes radical revisions in hull and superstructure design. The race, of course, was in size and speed.

The liners' public rooms grew constantly in number and splendor. To the Dining Saloons, Smoking Rooms and Ladies' Parlors were added Veranda Cafes, Observation Cocktail Lounges and Pompeian Swimming Pools. At first, the style was elaborately eclectic. A ship was meant to be a floating grand hotel with a familiar, land-based image. The Aquitania of 1914 had a Louis XVI Dining Saloon and Main Staircase, an Adam Drawing Room, a Jacobean Grille Room and a Swimming Pool decorated with replicas of Egyptian ornaments in the British Museum.

The Italian Line ships were carved and gilded versions of ponderous palazzi. The Cunard Line had working fireplaces. The German-built Amerika reproduced the restaurant of the Ritz-Carlton in London. The United States Line used frescoes of Indians and mounted moose heads. All had potted palms, and tassels and fringes trembled and swayed with the engines and the sea.

There was a superb understanding of the psychology of design for social purposes in such features as the Grand Staircases, which were catalysts for circulation and show. Balconied approaches to the first-class dining rooms offered unparalleled grand entrances. An architectural gem of a domed and decorated Grand Stair distinguished the Paris in 1921, and a triple-decker masterpiece of wood-veneered, Decorailed, flying balconies debouched into a Grand Salon on the Ile de France in 1927. (Later design descendants were bowdlerized versions in Miami Beach hotels.)

Cooper-Hewitt Museum

Balconied grand staircase on the Paris was a dramatic setting

The Ile de France was the acknowledged turning point of le style paquebot, described by John Maxtone-Graham as the "great divide from which point on decorators reached forward rather than back." Consortiums of artists were pressed into service by competing lines for the new style in the 1930's. The Queen Mary mounted more than 50 varieties of exotic wood veneers on flannel — to reduce creaking. The Normandie's Dining Salon, with two-story, sculptured Lalique glass panels, stretched literally for blocks.

There was only one standard — the superlative. In the realm of the sybaritic, the French always seemed to do it best. Until its very last days, the liner France was considered the finest French restaurant in the world. The vin ordinaire was free, the cellars were a hushed treasury of rare vintages, and the chefs leaped to anticipate the most epicurean demand.

In the 1950's, in a regrettable excess of modernity, the last great ships of the United States and Italian Lines stressed an overabundance of linoleum and aluminum. The economics, the pace and the clientele all changed. The glory that was Cunard and the grandeur that was the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique were sold for scrap or demoted to a tourist attraction. It was the end of the voyage. A great era, and a great style, died in corporate decisions made far from the sea.