

7-2012

From Ruhlmann to Rohde: How French Art Deco Became American

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From Ruhlmann to Rohde

How French Art Deco Became American

By Lily Meehan



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To my Dad: The dream continues...

“Your book will speak for itself if you write with authority and insight with which you are accustomed to speak.”

-Letter from Frank Lloyd Wright to Paul Frankl

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	5
An Introduction	7
Chapter 1: A Rejected Invitation	9
Chapter 2: Paris 1925	13
Chapter 3: Bringing Paris to America	20
Chapter 4: Department Stores Turn Moderne	23
Chapter 5: American Modernism Brewing	27
Chapter 6: America's Turn to Show "Progress"	36
Conclusion	44
Bibliography	46
List of Figures	49

Acknowledgments

It is very difficult to write a book of any length in nine weeks by yourself. This project would not have been possible without the assistance of many scholars throughout the country and their willingness to participate in my research. Their creativity, resourcefulness, knowledge and generosity have allowed me to meet my deadline and pursue a subject that has always intrigued me.

I thank the Mellon Summer Research Program for their generous financial support of my research project. Their funding also enabled me to travel throughout the United States to meet with curators and librarians as well as to view pertinent exhibitions. I would like to acknowledge the support of the College of the Holy Cross and Professor Daniel Klinghard who directed the Mellon Program this summer.

I also thank my faculty mentor, Fr. John Reboli SJ. Fr. Reboli has been working with me since February to help me develop and narrow my topic. In addition, Fr. Reboli has been a wonderful advisor, always willing to listen and push me further into my subject matter by asking new questions. I would not have been able to participate in the Mellon Summer Research Program without his guidance. Holy Cross reference librarian, Laura Hibbler never ceased to amaze me with her infinite knowledge of databases, primary sources and citation guidelines. I am so grateful her help.

During my travels I had the opportunity to meet with many librarians. I greatly appreciate the help of the staff of the Worcester Art Museum, the staff of The Thomas J. Watson Library in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the staff of the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Library, especially Ms. Elizabeth Broman. I also thank Curator

Catherine Futter for meeting with me in Kansas City, Missouri. Her work on decorative arts and the world's fairs was very insightful.

I give a big thank you to David Ryan, former Curator of Design in the Department of Architecture, Design, Decorative Arts, Craft, and Sculpture at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Mr. Ryan has been an incredible mentor, always willing to answer my questions and share his experiences as a museum curator and author. In addition, Mr. Ryan was very influential in my selection of travel locations, museums and libraries. He enthusiastically put me in touch with curators and dealers. I owe much of my success this summer to Mr. Ryan and his support.

In addition, I want to express my never-ending appreciation for my two wonderful parents, Kathy and Bill Meehan. My mom has always been a wonderful supporter of my work as well as a ruthless editor, always perfecting my use of commas and word choice. Meanwhile my dad has truly acted as a third mentor this summer. He has been teaching me about 1930s American art deco since I was a little girl and I am so happy that he was able to share his knowledge (and library) on the subject with me. Moreover, it has been wonderful sharing new discoveries together.

Finally I would like to thank my very talented friend and graphic designer, Lauren Poole for her assistance on this project. It is my pleasure to share the final product with all of my many supporters, friends and family. I hope you enjoy it.

Lily Meehan

Worcester, Massachusetts

July 2012

An Introduction

My whole life I have lived in a home full of toasters, percolators and dishes from the 1930s. My Dad has been collecting 1930s industrial design decorative arts and appliances for over twenty years, filling my home with objects my grandparents' generation remembers well. I call my friends on Henry Dreyfuss telephones. I check the time on Gilbert Rohde's No.4090 clock. Lurelle Guild's appliances inhabit my kitchen countertops. You could view my home as an impossible attempt to recreate the past, but I see it as an invitation to explore a world where the people were fascinated with new materials, innovations and artistic possibilities.

The American art deco designers of the 1930s were truly innovators, inventors and artists. They were not, however, the only ones creating "a modern world" during this time. In fact, America was one of the last countries to embrace the art deco style which was thriving in Germany, Austria, and France.

My preliminary research indicated that there was a strong connection between the French art décoratifs movement and early 20th century American industrial designs. Unfortunately there has been very little written on the subject. So I decided that I wanted to dedicate my summer to investigating how the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts held in Paris in 1925 heavily influenced the start of the American art deco movement.

With the generous support of the Mellon Summer Research Program for Humanities and Arts and the College of the Holy Cross, I have been given access to extensive resources throughout the country to aid me in my search for the bonds

between this 1925 exhibition and American art deco. Over nine weeks I have travelled to New York City, Philadelphia, and Kansas City, Missouri to explore museums and libraries and to meet with curators, librarians and professors. With each new trip and introduction, I was able to break down more barriers and bring myself closer to answers.

This process has been a rewarding one, full of new discoveries, adventures and acquaintances. It is my pleasure to share the final product of my research with you, the reader.

Chapter 1: A Rejected Invitation

The 1925 Paris Fair was in the planning stages for almost two decades before it actually came to fruition. With World War I derailing the original plans, the 1925 exhibition quickly became a celebration of not only design, but victory. This was the gateway to a new era. With that in mind, the French made several crucial decisions. The first was to insist that all admissions “be limited to works conceived in the ‘modern spirit’” being developed in Europe at that time.¹ Also revolutionary was their decision to be the first international exposition to be limited to applied arts, primarily objects found in the home. The second choice was to not invite Germany to participate in the Fair. The French still resented and feared Germany because of World War I. Meanwhile France reserved the four main exposition sites for their closest World War I allies, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium and the United States.² Finally, the invitations were sent out and France was well on its way to hosting a successful exhibition.

As anticipated, most countries were thrilled to accept France’s generous proposition. They immediately contacted their top designers, artists and innovators so they could begin to plan their pavilions and individual decorative arts submissions that would represent the modern aesthetics being developed in their countries. A buzz about the exhibition began to hum around the world as preparations were made for the big unveiling in April 1925. Everyone was excited about the big day.

¹ Commission on International exposition of modern decorative and industrial art, Paris, 1925, and Charles R. Richards. *Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925*. 1926.

² Ibid.

The United States, however, was watching all of these preparations from the sidelines. When Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, received the invitation from France, he began to examine the American art world to determine who and what he could send to represent the United States at the Fair. To Hoover's dismay he found very few artists working in the "modern spirit." In his opinion, those who were dabbling in the style had not yet achieved the level of greatness necessary for a World's Fair submission.³ Hoover decided that this exhibition could be an excellent learning opportunity for the United States, where artists and craftsmen from various fields could go and take notes about the exhibition with the purpose of bringing the "modern spirit" to the United States and in time adapt it in such a way that the American market would welcome and appreciate it.

After respectfully declining France's generous offer of a premier location pavilion, Hoover went to work forming a committee with three commissioners and 108 delegates on February 6, 1925.⁴ He appointed Charles R. Richards to chair the committee along with commissioners Henry Creanges and Frank Graham. Together they found delegates from all over the country to participate on their committee. These men worked everywhere from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the New York Times, to the National Association of Button Manufacturers to the Silk Association of America.⁵ Interestingly, most of the delegates had little, if anything, to do with industrial design or were artists themselves. Many were in the business of consumerism or art criticism.

³John Stuart Gordon, Keely Orgeman, and Yale University. Art Gallery, *A Modern World : American Design from the Yale University Art Gallery, 1920-1950*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery : in association with Yale University Press, 2011.)

⁴ Commission on International exposition of modern decorative and industrial art, Paris, 1925, and Charles R. Richards. *Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925.* 1926.

⁵ Ibid.

Why the commissioners overlooked many young artists and decorative arts designers from New York, Chicago and Los Angeles remains unknown.

It is known, however, that these young and talented designers were already working at this time. In fact, many of them were slightly offended by Hoover's claim that modern design did not yet exist in the United States. For example, in New York City Paul Frankl was already examining French art deco aesthetics and looking for ways to adapt them for the American eye.⁶ Also in New York was Minnesota native Donald Deskey, who had already studied painting in France and returned to the United States to start his career.⁷ Nevertheless Deskey, being a true Francophile when it came to art, decided he would venture back to Paris for the 1925 exhibition on his own to create some new sketches and see how the new moderne style would influence his future work. Meanwhile future star industrial designer, Russel Wright, was in New York working as a set designer on Broadway. He created lavish sets, often throwing old-fashioned aesthetics aside in favor of a more modern approach.⁸ Wright was unaware that ahead of him would be an artistic career beyond the theater walls. He would influence residential life. His style would resonate with the new generation of designers to come following the 1925 exhibition.

Herbert Hoover may have been unaware of the potential that these men were already showing, yet he was aware of America's need for modern decorative arts. With the decision made and a diverse set of delegates ready to embark on a journey to gay

⁶ Christopher Long, *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.)

⁷ David A. Hanks, and Jennifer Toher, *Donald Deskey : Decorative Designs and Interiors*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987.)

⁸ J. Stewart Johnson, *American Modern: 1925-1940 - Design For A New Age*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000)
182

Paris, Hoover had unknowingly made a bold choice that would forever change the trajectory of modern decorative arts in the United States. Their report back to him would become an outline for the future of modern design in America.

Chapter 2: Paris 1925

Between April and October of 1925, 16,025,099 people ventured to Paris to see the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes.⁹ It was the event of the year and drew spectators from all over the world. Both banks of the Seine were covered by a wide variety of pavilions and architectural marvels waiting to impress and inspire those who came to the Fair, which was centered on the Grand Palais¹⁰. Many people considered this exhibition to be a way for France to show its “cultural authority”, always being ahead in design innovation.¹¹ In addition, the exhibition was an excellent opportunity to promote the trading of ideas and goods among countries. Finally the Fair was an opportunity to endorse colonization and showcase the efforts of the French colonies and empire as a whole.¹²

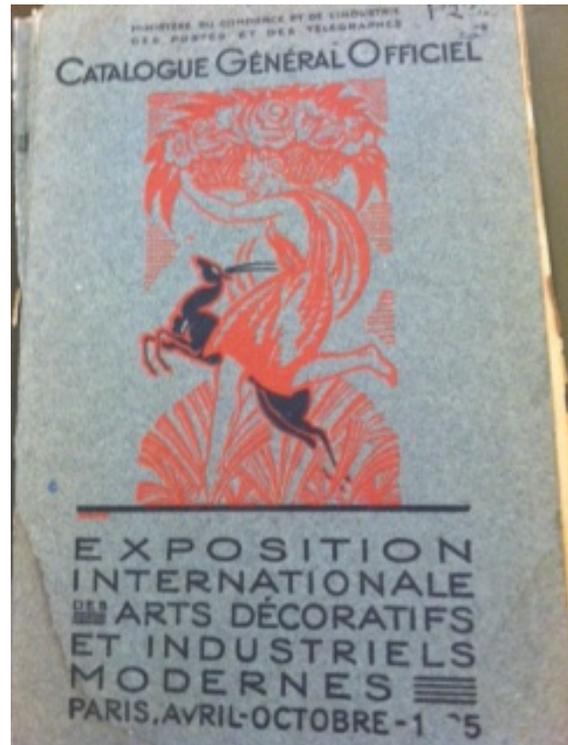


Figure 1. 1925 Paris Exposition Catalogue

Together the pavilions created a small village of modernity within the ancient Parisian metropolis. People were pleased to see many French icons among the

⁹ Commission on International exposition of modern decorative and industrial art, Paris, 1925, and Charles R. Richards. *Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925.* 1926.

¹⁰ *Exposition Internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes.* Paris: with Ministère du commerce et de l'industrie, 1925. Exhibition catalog.

¹¹ Museum of the City of New York, *Paris-New York : Design Fashion Culture, 1925-1940,* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 12.

¹² Robert W Rydell, *World of Fairs :The Century-of-Progress Expositions,* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 6.

exhibits from other countries including, but not limited to the Eiffel Tower bathed in electric light, famous department store Au Bon Marché's exhibit by Louis-Hippolyte Boileau and Le Corbusier's pavilion titled l'Esprit Nouveau.¹³ These offered everything from a new interpretation of a classic and famous landmark, new ideas for high-end department stores throughout the world and a functionalist's perspective on the décor of a modern home.

As remarkable as the outside of the different pavilions were, what they held inside was even more extraordinary. The decorative arts were organized in different categories making it easy to find whatever you wanted. These categories included ensembles of finished rooms, perfumery, jewelry, ceramics, glass and leather goods.¹⁴ For some of the more traditional exhibits, the objects were found separated and displayed on pedestals like many art museums still do today. Other exhibits consisted of model homes and diorama rooms to show how the many categories within decorative arts could be combined to create modern homes around the world.

The style of the French decorative arts at the Fair is often described as a combination of pure and ornamental.¹⁵ This referred to the design and in some cases the decoration of the pieces. Many objects featured floral or botanical ornamentation presented in a more modernistic way, creating a silhouette instead of a naturalistic representation. E.J. Ruhlmann's cabinets often featured this element shown in Figure 2. Notice the juxtaposition of the white and the dark wood creating a contrasting effect

¹³ Museum of the City of New York, *Paris-New York : Design Fashion Culture, 1925-1940*, (New York: Monacelli Press, 2008), 13.

¹⁴ Commission on International exposition of modern decorative and industrial art, Paris, 1925, and Charles R. Richards. *Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925*. 1926.

¹⁵ Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco Furniture :The French Designers*,(New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984), 14.

in the central design. Ruhlmann also uses the white again in his simplistic dotted border along the edge of the façade of this cabinet. His cabinets and other furniture displayed at the 1925 Exposition made him an overnight success after having slaved away for nine years perfecting his crafts and designs.¹⁶ In many ways, his works were considered an important landmark in the portrayal of French art deco design in the exposition.



Figure 2 . Émile-Jacques. Ruhlmann État cabinet.

¹⁶ Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco Furniture :The French Designers*,(New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984), 164.

In addition to Ruhlmann, there were many famous French decorative art designers present to show their wares to the global community. These included Legrain, Brandt, Dunard, Jallot, Rousseau, Sue et Mare, Gray, Lalique and Le Corbusier.¹⁷ The bulk of the exposition was created by these great artists and in many ways their work set the bar for other countries' submissions to this international exposition.

Over the years many art historians have chosen to focus on Le Corbusier's spectacularly functionalistic and minimalistic pavilion l'Esprit Nouveau. Due to its more functional design it is known as Le Corbusier's "engineer aesthetic."¹⁸ Le Corbusier believed decorative arts should be shown as they are used in real homes. Therefore his pavilion was a model home fully furnished in his designs. "It consisted of a fully outfitted model home, equipped with standardized furnishings and Purist paintings, as well as displays of Le Corbusier's town planning schemes: The Contemporary City and the Plan Voisin for Paris (with a 'large geometric grid in its center')." ¹⁹ He was a purist in design. He did not believe in having a great deal of ornamentation and vegetation on his pieces. His ideas were based on form and function. Le Corbusier was also a minimalist and was one of the first furniture designers to accept the idea that furniture did not need to have multiple design elements to make it both a work of art and a practical household item.

¹⁷Paul Greenhalgh, *Fair World : A History of World's Fairs and Expositions, from London to Shanghai, 1851-2010*, (Winterbourne, Berkshire, U.K: Papadakis, 2011), 220-226.

¹⁸Carol S.Eliel, Françoise Ducros, Tag Gronberg, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *L'Esprit Nouveau : Purism in Paris, 1918-1925*, (Los Angeles, Calif.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 107.

¹⁹ Ibid, 103.



Figure 3. L'Esprit Nouveau pavilion interior.

Although Le Corbusier's work did not reflect all of the same design characteristics as Ruhlmann and many other French designers, his work was still distinctly French in comparison to the more streamlined and architectural designs Americans would create a few years later. Le Corbusier, however, can be considered a transitional artist in aesthetic terms between France and the United States.

Le Corbusier's pavilion, along with the many other French pavilions found at the 1925 exhibition, were enjoyed by American visitors as well as Hoover's appointed committee. The general reaction, however, suggested that the French moderne aesthetic was too bold for the current American market. The French use of form and

color in particular was considered bizarre and too avant-garde.²⁰ Nevertheless, the Americans were intrigued by the French artistic movement and were able to draw some important conclusions from the exhibition. First, modern design, whether they liked it or not, was going to become *the* design form globally. Second, France had gained a distinct advantage over the United States; therefore the United States must embrace the new style in order to compete in the global market. Finally, the Americans noticed that the French did not utilize mass production to its potential.²¹ Almost everything shown at the Fair was one of a kind. The French were known for custom pieces made for special commissions. The committee concluded that pairing American mass production with French modern design could put the United States' mark on the art deco movement.

Commissioner Henry Creange wrote an economic paper to accompany the Hoover report focusing solely on the idea of mass production in the art market. He agreed that this was an interesting field for the United States to concentrate.²² Creange stated, "To anticipate the demand is dangerous, to await it is fatal."²³ Taking on the modern style and applying it to industry was going to be a risk, but Creange gave Hoover a very concise and influential argument explaining the benefits for the United States' economy as well as its artistic standing in the world.

By the time the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes came to a close in October of 1925 the American committee returned to the

²⁰ Commission on International exposition of modern decorative and industrial art, Paris, 1925, and Charles R. Richards. *Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925.* 1926.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

United States full of sketches, notes, memories and ideas ready to present their findings to Hoover. Together they were determined to bring the modern style to America so it would never again have to decline such a prestigious invitation. Now their task was to gain the interest of an American public who had been unable or unwilling to visit the exhibition in Paris.

Chapter 3: Bringing Paris to America

Upon the committee's return to the United States, Chairman Charles R. Richards, who was director of the American Association of Museums at the time, decided to bring the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes to the United States for those who were unable to attend themselves.²⁴ Richards immediately formed an alliance with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City to create an exhibition that would begin in New York and tour nine different U.S. cities featuring approximately 400 objects handpicked from the Paris exposition.²⁵ The goal was to highlight the many different facets of *le style moderne* found in France and around the world. He chose pieces from many different countries' pavilions but picked a vast amount of French designers, hoping to pay homage to the host country and reinforce their undeniable leadership in the style.

The major task for Richards was picking a small collection of works from the diverse exhibition. His personal opinions regarding the style can be derived from his personal selections for the travelling exhibit. For example, Richards chose many pieces of furniture from the French duo Sue and Mare, but chose to exclude all works from Le Corbusier's *l'Esprit Nouveau*. The rest of the collection included works by Ruhlmann, Rateau and Jallot. In addition, Richards chose many works from Italy, Austria and Great Britain.²⁶ By showing objects from countries other than France, Richards was

²⁴ Janet Kardon, Rosemarie Haag Bletter, and American Craft Museum, *Craft in the Machine Age, 1920-1945*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the American Craft Museum, 1995), 66.

²⁵ David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design," *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

²⁶ *A Selected Collection of Objects from The International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art at Paris 1925*. (New York City: Metropolitan Museum of Art, with The American Association of Museums, 1926.) Exhibition Catalog.

able to demonstrate to the American public the enthusiastic reception *le style moderne* had throughout the world. Luckily, art critics and the general public alike approved of his selections. The *New York Times* even claimed, "Professor Richards, through whose efforts the exhibition in America was made possible, has shown himself as adept in the art of selection."²⁷

In February of 1926 the Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its doors to America welcoming visitors to their miniature version of the 1925 Paris Exposition entitled "A Selected Collection of Objects from the International Exposition Modern, Industrial and Decorative Arts"²⁸. This event acted as a formal introduction of French art deco design to the American public. For the first time these pieces were on American soil. Although the exhibition was only open for several weeks in New York, the collection continued to excite Americans for months as it travelled from city to city throughout 1926. These cities included Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Boston, Minneapolis and Philadelphia. All of the pieces in the travelling exhibition were for sale, which was a new concept.²⁹

Overall, the exhibition was well received by the general public as well as those in the decorative arts field. The *New York Times* praised the exhibition on a conceptual level stating, "It was an excellent idea to bring this selection from the exposition at Paris over to America, a still more excellent idea to show it at a museum in different parts of the United States in order to establish it as a museum material, which emphatically it is

²⁷ "French Decorative Art on Exhibition". *New York Times*, February 28, 1926.

²⁸ David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design," *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

²⁹ Ibid.

unless one should make the barbarous contention that the development of decorative art stopped with the nineteenth century.”³⁰ Many American designers took advantage of this brief opportunity to learn more about their European competition. In addition, department store owners, designers and buyers were finally exposed to this new style and began to wonder how they could incorporate it into their merchandise, exhibits and store windows. Needless to say, the United States finally made contact with *le style moderne*.

³⁰ “French Decorative Art on Exhibition”. *New York Times*, February 28, 1926.

Chapter 4: Department Stores Turn Moderne

On February 28, 1926 the *New York Times* commented on the travelling exhibition being held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the possible effect this exhibit would have on American department stores and consumers. “There is reason to believe from recent episodes that our own department stores and general shops will follow suit and encourage American design and workmanship on a large scale.”³¹ The reporter noticed that French department stores had been heavily involved in the 1925 Exposition, some having their own pavilions. Their department stores were intent on showcasing French designers featuring the latest style. If American designers would take new risks in design like the French, it was predicted that they, too would one day be displayed in American department stores. At the time, however, American department stores settled for anything French they could get their hands on for each of their decorative arts departments.

After *le style moderne*'s debut on American soil, the wealthier American consumers became interested in investing in the new designs by either purchasing from the touring exhibit or commissioning pieces from the European designers themselves. All of a sudden Europeans had entered the American decorative arts market and were happy to do so as long as the demand continued. In all of the major cities in the United States, decorative arts departments were being enlarged to fit more and more imported designs. These designers were quickly becoming staples in American department store inventories and coveted by the American public.

³¹ “French Decorative Art on Exhibition”. *New York Times*, February 28, 1926.

Subsequently, American department stores decided to import European ways when designing displays for their new wares. Traditionally decorative arts were separated by function, kitchen items in one section, armchairs and couches in another and so on. One of the innovations of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs Industriels et Modernes of 1925 was their use of “ensemble” displays.³² This meant showing fully decorated room dioramas, to give the consumer an idea of how the pieces individually come together to create a beautiful and trendy space highlighting *le style moderne*. This new type of display was called “the art of the ensemble.”³³

The American public would become more and more familiar with the art of the ensemble as various department stores decided to host their own expositions of modern European design in their stores annually.³⁴ Macy’s, which is still a favorite department store in America today, was one of the first to embrace the idea of having their own decorative art expos. In 1927 Macy’s decided to collaborate with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to launch their new modern decorative art exposition series.³⁵ From May 2nd to May 7th, of 1927 the Met cohosted Macy’s “Exposition of Art in Trade.”³⁶ This exposition featured European as well as some American decorative arts. It was an important moment for industrial design as it finally began to creep into the American art world. Although only a week long, the exposition was a huge success and drew a lot of attention from important people in the art world. For instance rising designer, Paul Frankl, gave a speech on the skyscraper in decoration during the week. The now

³² H.I. Brock. “*The New Art of Ensemble is Revealed*,” *New York Times*, February 28, 1926.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, “Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design,” *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Exposition of Art in Trade*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, with Macy’s, 1927.) Exhibition catalog.

famous artist, Rockwell Kent, donated some of his prints.³⁷ Even Herbert Hoover had something to say about the exposition. “I am greatly interested in the whole subject of art in industry and an exhibit of the kind contemplated by your committee because of its fine influence on cultural and educational standards in this country.”³⁸ In short, the exposition and collaboration was a success and paved the way for Macy’s and other

department stores to continue to host their own expositions within their own buildings.

Between 1927 and 1931 all of the major department stores in New York had put together their own shows. Some focused primarily on international designs including Lord and Taylor’s “An Exposition of Modern French Decorative Art and R.H. Macy and Company’s “The International Exposition of Art in Industry” both held in 1928.³⁹ Some American designers, however, were accepted into these international shows. Kem Weber from Los Angeles created three full rooms for the



Figure 4. Poster from Lord & Taylor’s L’Art Décoratif exposition.

³⁷ *Exposition of Art in Trade*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, with Macy’s, 1927.) Exhibition catalog.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design," *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

Macy's 1928 expo.⁴⁰ Other shows featured American creations like Bloomingdale's "Model Homes, The Newark Museum's "Modern American Design in Metal," and Chase National Bank's "First Exhibition, American Designer's Gallery."⁴¹

For the first time American decorative and industrial arts were taking center stage, overshadowing European creations. People were interested in the many ways that American designers had altered the aesthetic for an American audience. They were also impressed by their innovation to mass produce decorative arts making them more accessible to all Americans. Finally having exposure in department stores and other public forums, Americans became interested in learning more about these designers and what their plans were for the future of American homes.

⁴⁰ *An International Exposition of Art in Industry*, (New York: Macy's, 1928.) Exhibition catalog.

⁴¹David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design," *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

Chapter 5: American Modernism Brewing

“Art in general and especially the art of interior decoration depends not alone on the artist but largely on the public. Therefore interior decoration as an art can only grow where artist and public work hand in hand, and where society is aware of its duty to cultivate further art.”⁴² In the years following the 1925 Paris Exposition, American designers saw a unique opportunity to bring a European movement to the United States. They wanted to adapt it in a way that would make the style distinctly American and attractive to an American audience. Design pioneers including Paul Frankl, Donald Deskey and Kem Weber were already working with department stores and were making great strides, yet the public was still unfamiliar with them and other designers in the American decorative arts.

Paul Frankl was born in Austria and came to America in April 1914.⁴³ He was studying art and wanted to see what he could accomplish in the American art market. Although Frankl never attended the Paris Exposition of 1925, he remained interested in France’s innovations. Frankl was aware and offended by Hoover’s decision to not send any designs to the Exposition from the United States. Unfortunately the world was unaware of Frankl and the other pioneers’ talents at the time. Frankl understood the opportunity that the exposition in Paris had given to American designers. Finally the American public was accepting *le style moderne* in their museums, department stores and eventually their homes. So in the summer of 1925 while Frankl was in Woodstock,

⁴² Christopher Long, *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 31.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 23.

New York, he started to experiment with new designs for American consumers that could be easily produced for a lower price than European designs.⁴⁴

In his book *New Dimensions* (1928), Frankl explains how skyscrapers are the monument of American business and enterprise.⁴⁵ Skyscrapers were unique to United States. Frankl concluded, "If it had been possible to have sent an entire building

abroad, it would have been a more vital contribution in the field of modern art than all they things done in Europe added together."⁴⁶ Keeping the idea of skyscrapers in mind and their verticality, Frankl started stacking furniture in his small cabin during the summer of 1925. The result was a line of "skyscraper furniture" displayed in his showroom later that year on 48th Street in New York City. His skyscraper collection emphasized simplicity, plain surfaces, unbroken lines, accentuation of structural necessity, dramatization of the intrinsic beauty of materials, and elimination of copying meaningless and distracting motives of the past.⁴⁷



Figure 5. Paul Frankl's Skyscraper desk.

⁴⁴ Christopher Long, *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 65.

⁴⁵ Paul T. Frankl, *New Dimensions; the Decorative Arts of Today in Words & Pictures*, (New York: Payson & Clarke, 1928), 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 61

⁴⁷ David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design," *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

Unlike the French, Frankl's works were not ornate and detailed in design. Form and function were paramount instead of decoration. He was still interested in using many different types of wood. This is easily shown through Figures 5 and 6. He was interested in using different grains of wood; however he tended to use cheaper woods instead of the best grades. He also began exploring different types of lacquer for wood as shown in Figure 7. Design over quality seemed to be his motto which was a new concept in a world where only the wealthiest of people were able to afford the latest European or even American designs. Department stores, in particular Gimbel's, liked Frankl's ability to engage American consumers making his works very popular in department stores throughout the United States.⁴⁸



Figure 6. Paul Frankl desk and bookcase.

⁴⁸ Christopher Long, *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 83.



Figure 7 . Paul Frankl's Skycraper bookcase.

Over the years, Frankl became good friends with Donald Deskey. Throughout their careers they collaborated more than once, bringing art deco to the homes of the American public. Deskey, unlike Frankl, was born in the United States in Blue Earth, Minnesota.⁴⁹ As a young man he studied art and architecture from time to time and served in the United States Army. While teaching art at Juniata College he decided to

⁴⁹David A. Hanks, and Jennifer Toher, *Donald Deskey : Decorative Designs and Interiors*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987,) 187.

return to France, where he had met and married his wife, to see the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes.⁵⁰ Deskey saw great potential in the French designs and decided to visit the Bauhaus collection. He discovered ways to incorporate the European aesthetics into his own work.



Figure 8. Deskey screen for Frankl Galleries.

Deskey received many commissions for public places during his career. When he returned to the United States in 1926, Franklin Simon Department Store asked him to redesign their window displays.⁵¹ He was very interested in using industrial materials such as cork for the walls, galvanized iron and brass. Materials would continue to interest him throughout this career.⁵² Impressed with his designs for Franklin Simon, Saks Fifth Avenue hired him for their own windows. Using his connections in high places, Deskey showed Adam Gimbel some screens he had created in Paris and suggested that they be

connected with Paul Frankl's skyscraper furniture.⁵³ Being associated with Frankl changed Deskey's career dramatically. He was constantly meeting influential designers and manufacturers from all over the world who began asking him to design more

⁵⁰ David A. Hanks, and Jennifer Toher, *Donald Deskey : Decorative Designs and Interiors*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987,) 187.

⁵¹ Ibid, 3.

⁵² Ibid, 4.

⁵³ Ibid, 4.

screens, textiles, furniture, lamps and even clocks. Eventually he had enough experience to furnish full apartments for people. At the same time his works were being prominently displayed in some of the shows discussed in the previous chapter including “Modern American Design in Metal” at The Newark Museum and “AUDAC Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts” at The Brooklyn Museum in 1931.

Deskey’s most well-known commission was Radio City Music Hall in 1932.⁵⁴ By convincing manager Samuel L. “Roxy” Rothafel that the modern art deco style was best for the music hall, he won the competition and transformed it into a true art deco landmark.⁵⁵ With a small army of artists and manufacturers, a low budget and a great deal of innovation and attention to detail, Deskey was able to complete the entire design project in six months. As before Deskey decided to use new materials for this project including aluminum and Bakelite.⁵⁶ As shown in Figure 9, Deskey’s designs were fresh and modernistic.



Figure 9. First Mezzanine Lounge of Radio City Music Hall by Deskey.

Above Radio City Music Hall, Deskey was also commissioned to decorate an apartment for Roxy, in keeping with his modern aesthetics. Deskey reminisced, “I

⁵⁴ David A. Hanks, and Jennifer Toher, *Donald Deskey : Decorative Designs and Interiors*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987,) 100.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 100.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 108.

probably was strongly influenced by the Paris Exposition of 1925. The use of rare veneers, lacquers, surfaces, aluminum, glass and specially woven carpets and fabrics were specified for the interior to create an aura of luxury to satisfy public tastes.”⁵⁷ Deskey was willing to introduce the public to the new modern taste making it ever present in their cosmopolitan society.

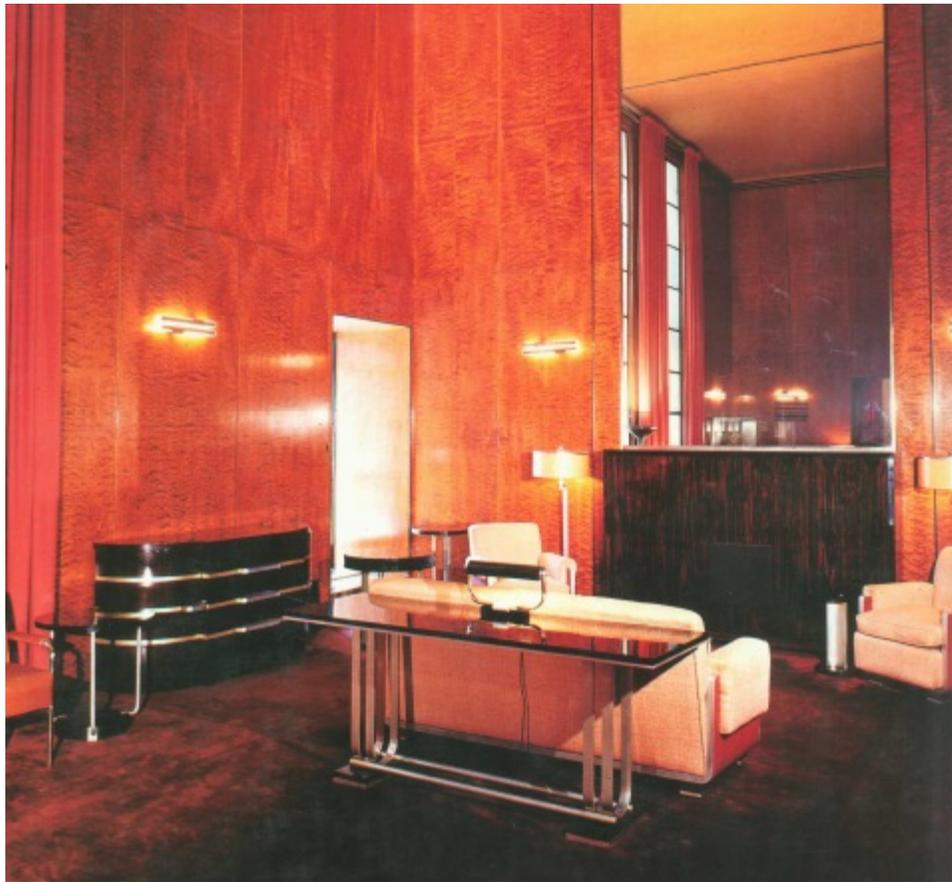


Figure 10. Roxv's Apartment above Radio City Music Hall by Deskey.

While Paul Frankl and Donald Deskey were making great progress in New York City during this time, the West Coast was being introduced to the new moderne style by Kem Weber. Originally from Germany, Weber came to San Francisco in 1914 as a

⁵⁷ David A. Hanks, and Jennifer Toher, *Donald Deskey : Decorative Designs and Interiors*, (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987,) 108.

supervisor for the Panama-Pacific Exposition.⁵⁸ During World War I, he was convinced to stay in the United States for his own safety. Following the war he started showcasing his own designs in a small gallery in Santa Barbara.⁵⁹ Unfortunately life in Santa Barbara did not work out so he went off to Los Angeles where he became Art Director for Barker Bros and a United States citizen.⁶⁰ In 1925 Weber decided to go to Europe for an extended trip. Although it has not been cited if Weber personally attended the 1925 Exposition or not, Weber comments often in his notes how the Parisian Zigzag Moderne influenced his designs. His trip to Europe certainly solidified his commitment to modern design.⁶¹

In 1928 Kem Weber stated, “The basis of all design is construction.”⁶² By this time he had opened his own studio in Hollywood and was being featured prominently on the East Coast in Macy’s “The First International Exposition of Arts and Trades” as discussed in Chapter 4 and shown in Figure 11.⁶³ There was no doubt that he had embraced the new modern style and was a true industrial designer. His commissions were nationwide and were well-received by the public. His works were comparable to Frankl and Deskey’s with their focus on



Figure 11. Kem Weber’s Bathroom for Macy’s Exposition

⁵⁸ Gebhard, David, Harriette Von Breton, University of California, Santa Barbara, and Art Gallery. *Kem Weber: The Moderne in Southern California 1920 through 1941*, [Exhibition at] the Art Galleries, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 11 to March 23, 1969, (Santa Barbara: Printed by Standard Print, 1969), 38.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 39.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 39.

⁶¹ Ibid, 39.

⁶² Ibid, 40.

⁶³ Ibid, 40.

verticality or horizontality, geometry and cubism. Ziggurat and skyscraper motifs are shown in his works in addition to distinct curves. One notable example is his “Skyscraper” vanity from 1928-1929.⁶⁴

The ziggurat and skyscraper motifs truly define the American decorative art collections from 1926-1932. French born, American industrial designer Raymond Loewy who spent most of his career as an industrial designer focusing little of his time on interior design created the *Columaire* clock-radio in 1930 for Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company of Mansfield, Ohio. (Figure 12)⁶⁵ It was the first clock-radio and was made for and marketed by Westinghouse. It was a relatively expensive piece for the time considering the stock market crash that had taken place one year before. The clock-radio’s design epitomizes American skyscrapers and symbolizes American society and its hard work to build a brighter tomorrow.⁶⁶

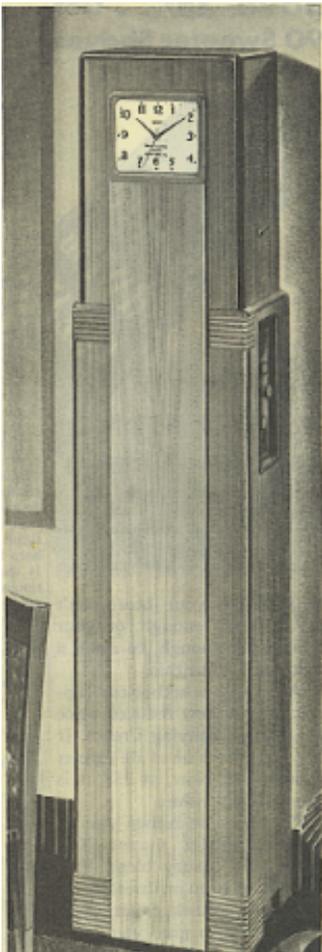


Figure 12. Columaire .

⁶⁴ David Ryan, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts, "Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design," *In Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, (Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007), 18-23.

⁶⁵ Raymond Loewy. *Radiocabinet*. US Design Patent 84,530, March 7, 1931, and June 30, 1931.

⁶⁶ Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company, "Columaire." Magazine advertisement. *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 7, 1931.

Chapter 6: America's Turn to Show "Progress" Chicago 1933

By 1933 thousands of Americans were suffering in the depths of the Great Depression. Many were without jobs, having their homes foreclosed and patronizing local soup kitchens that had great difficulty keeping up with the ever rising demand. America's future looked bleak and the public needed something to believe in. The word "tomorrow" was no longer a measure of time. It symbolized a heavy hope that one day America would rise again and revel in technology and innovation. It was this idea that

inspired the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, celebrating not only the centennial celebration of Chicago but the technological, scientific and design innovations of the United States still being produced in this hard time.

From May 27th to November 1st, 1933 one hundred thousand Americans travelled to Chicago to experience "a century of progress."⁶⁷ For fifty cents each Americans were able to immerse themselves into the United States of the future, complete with the Burlington Train exhibition, the Hall of Science, the Sky Ride and The House of Tomorrow.⁶⁸ To top off their futuristic tour, fairgoers visited the Electrical pavilion shared by a group of companies. There the



Figure 13. Poster from 1933 World's Fair.

⁶⁷ Robert W Rydell, *World of Fairs :The Century-of-Progress Expositions*, (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 162.

public was able to witness Westinghouse's robot, Willie Vocalite.⁶⁹ Willie was able to sit, stand, talk, sing, operate appliances and smoke a cigarette.⁷⁰ Considered a "scientific marvel," many Americans believed that one day robots would work alongside man in everyday life.⁷¹

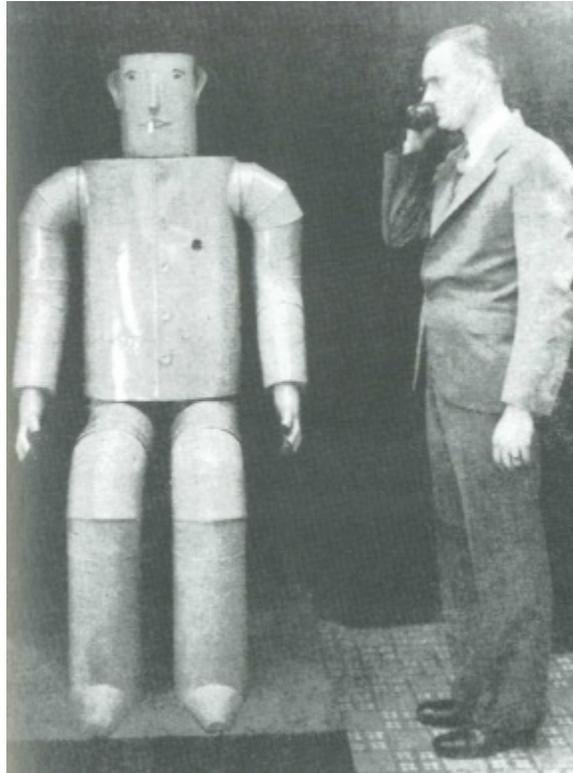


Figure 14. Willie Vocalite receiving commands.

Although most people had little to spend on frivolous objects, especially decorative arts, the idea of futuristic objects was so intriguing and hopeful that they still sold well at the Chicago Fair. "The fantasy of future living or 'technological utopianism'—with its attendant encouragement for fairgoers to embrace modernism by purchasing

⁶⁹Scott Schaut, *Robots of Westinghouse, 1924-Today*, (Mansfield, Ohio: Scott Schaut, Mansfield Memorial Museum, 2006), 69-71.

⁷⁰Ibid, 67.

⁷¹Ibid, 67.

objects was a recurring theme at the 1933 Fair and the many that followed.”⁷² The 1933 Fair served as a connection between new innovations in technology and design, commerce and the everyday lives of the American public.⁷³ In addition, the 1933 Fair marked the completion of the transition from European art deco to American streamlined design.

Throughout the 1920s the United States was the definition of prosperity and the skyscraper had become the architectural symbol of that prosperity. As shown in Chapter 5 transitional designers like Frankl, Deskey and Loewy incorporated this symbol into their work in many different ways, which became a major part of the American art deco aesthetic. After the economic collapse, however, the skyscraper was no longer a pillar of prosperity but a symbol of failure and economic distress. Designers quickly recognized this change of heart and began to work on designs that were more industrial in form and material. They began to streamline their objects focusing on machines and how they work. “The designers stripped Deco-design of its fauna and flora in favor of the aerodynamic-pure-line concept of motion and speed culled from scientific thinking.”⁷⁴ Instead of looking stationary, many of their pieces appeared to be in motion. The designers were also interested in new materials that were unconventional like chrome, aluminum, Bakelite, neon, Catalin and Vitrolite.

⁷² Jason T. Busch, Catherine Futter, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, Stephen Harrison, Karin A. Jones, Martin P. Levy, Dawn Reid, Ethan Robey, Annamarie V. Sandecki, Jane Shadel Spillman, Kevin W. Tucker, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art, *Inventing the Modern World : Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. (Pittsburgh, Pa. : Carnegie Museum of Art ; Kansas City, Mo; New York: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 231.

⁷³ Ibid, 231.

⁷⁴ Robert Heide, and John Gilman, *Popular Art Deco : Depression Era Style and Design*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991), 27.

With the 1933 Chicago Fair approaching, industrial designers were feverishly planning, designing and manufacturing new products. By this time the Kodak Company was a household name in America and was looking to keep up with the modern aesthetics. They hired Walter Dorwin Teague, who was a major industrial designer at the time, to create a stylish and innovative camera for their 1931 collection.⁷⁵ This piece embraced the new ideas regarding form and materials featuring a simple geometric design reminiscent of a rising sun made of leather with glass enamel with metal inlay and was kept in a box with the same design made of cedar with an ebony finish inlaid with colored glass enamel and metal.⁷⁶



Figure 15. Walter Dorwin Teague's No. 1A Gift Kodak.

⁷⁵ Eastman Kodak Company, "No. 1A Gift Kodak." Magazine advertisement. *The Saturday Evening Post*, December 6, 1930.

⁷⁶ Ibid.



Figure 16. Big Ben Clock.

Concurrently, novice industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss was making the transition from stage designer to industrial designer.⁷⁷ He was inspired by other designers like Norman Bel Geddes and previously mentioned designer Walter Dorwin Teague who were venturing out into the industrial design field.⁷⁸ One of his major projects leading up to the 1933 Fair was redesigning a well-known alarm clock for Western Clock Co.⁷⁹ Starting in 1910 the Big Ben alarm clock became a well-known piece for many Americans.

Every few years, the Western Clock Co. would redesign it slightly to fit the latest trends. Dreyfuss decided to streamline the design somewhat making it “appear thinner and by implication, mechanically superior.”⁸⁰ He also kept more expensive clocks in mind when redesigning the Big Ben hoping to give an inexpensive piece a more luxurious flare.⁸¹ This piece would be his claim to fame during the 1933 World’s Fair. The following year, Dreyfuss continued to break into the field by redesigning a kitchen utensil line, Androck, for the Washburn Company in Worcester, MA.⁸²



Figure 17. Part of the Androck utensil line, Washburn Company.

⁷⁷ Russell Flinchum, and Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer : The Man in the Brown Suit*, (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution and Rizzoli, 1997), 47.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 48.

⁷⁹ Western Clock Co., “Big Ben Chime Alarm Clock.” Magazine advertisement. *American Magazine*, October 1931.

⁸⁰ Russell Flinchum, and Cooper-Hewitt Museum, *Henry Dreyfuss, Industrial Designer : The Man in the Brown Suit*, (New York: Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution and Rizzoli, 1997), 72.

⁸¹ Ibid, 72.

⁸² Ibid, 50.

Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild, another industrial designer, also got his start in the theater. Guild, however, was a Broadway and movie actor.⁸³ He was inspired by the new modern style but personally remained mainly conservative in his own designs. In 1932 he created a drip coffee pot called *Wear-Ever Early American No. 5052* which was certainly streamline in form yet vaguely reminiscent of colonial times in design, meshing the past and present. With time Guild, too would use moving objects as inspiration for his designs. By 1933 he used a comet as inspiration for a set of canapé plates made to hold a drink, hors-d'oeuvre, and cigarette, leaving the other hand free to shake hands with guests at a party. (Figure 18) For Guild, it was paramount that an industrial designer work from the inside out to produce a functional and stylish object that lacked excess ornamentation.⁸⁴



Figure 18. Guild Individual Canapé Plate.

Gilbert Rohde was a master at this design philosophy. He took streamlined design to the forefront, making him extremely popular at the 1933 Chicago World's Fair. Rohde furnished multiple rooms in the Design for Living House.⁸⁵ "Rohde's approach to the interiors of the exposition house was allied with the *ensemblier* tradition, in which the designer chose every detail for the room and designed accessories, fabrics, lighting and rugs. This was especially true in the bedrooms which featured his light fixtures,

⁸³ Alice Elizabeth Lloyd Farlowe, *Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild : Industrial Designs for Living*, 2004.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde : Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 81.

wallpaper (for one bedroom), bedspreads, and new line of clocks for Herman Miller.⁸⁶

Like the French, Rohde enjoyed creating ensembles for display. For one of the bedrooms in the House of Tomorrow, he created with the Herman Miller Company chromium-plated steel-tubed, Bakelite, and wood vanity with upholstered ottoman.⁸⁷

(Figure 19) Everything about this piece was futuristic and streamlined with its innovative materials and circular construction. Rohde's favorite and probably most memorable piece from the 1933 fair is his No.4090 clock produced by the Herman Miller

Clock Company. (Figure 20) It has been referred to as the "Z-Clock" by collectors in the past. It was highlighted in the Fair's Masonite House on the mantel in the living room.⁸⁸

Rohde out-did himself with his cut plate glass clock with black stamped steel hands and chromium-plated steel tubes supporting the clock at an acute angle. This piece is the definition of modern and continues to be a favorite among museums and collectors today.



Figure 19. Gilbert Rohde's vanity and ottoman.

⁸⁶Phyllis Ross, *Gilbert Rohde : Modern Design for Modern Living*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 84.

⁸⁷ Jason T. Busch, Catherine Futter, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, Stephen Harrison, Karin A. Jones, Martin P. Levy, Dawn Reid, Ethan Robey, Annamarie V. Sandecki, Jane Shadel Spillman, Kevin W. Tucker, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art, *Inventing the Modern World : Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. (Pittsburgh, Pa. : Carnegie Museum of Art ; Kansas City, Mo; New York: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 232-233.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 233.

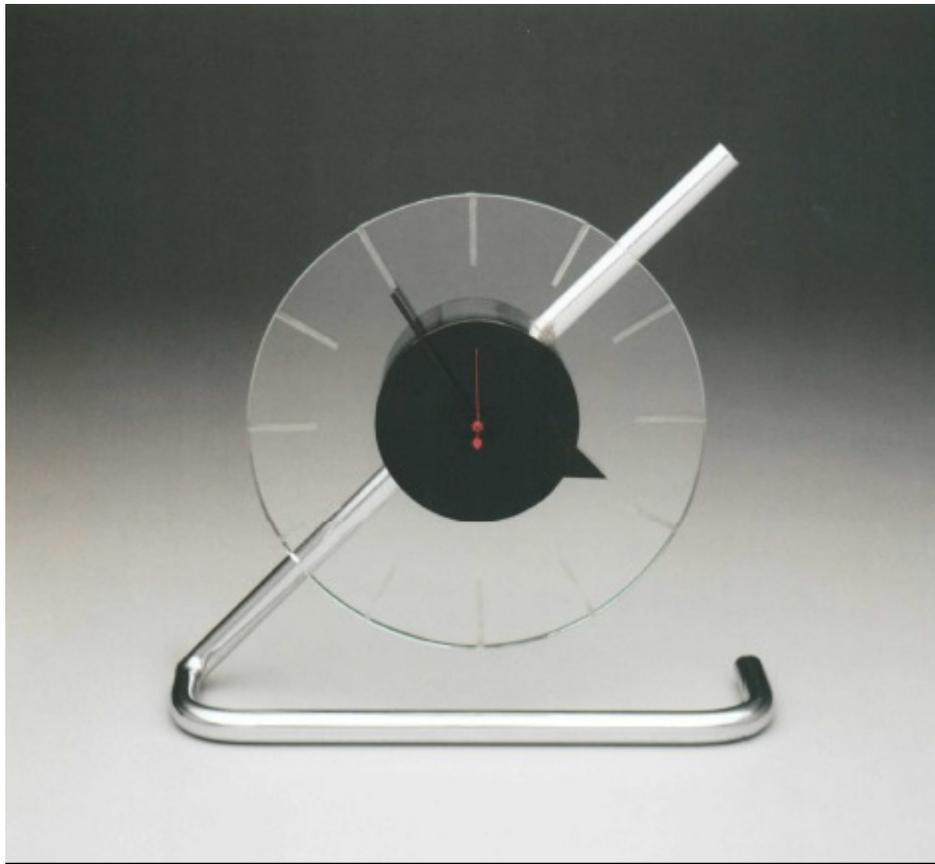


Figure 20. No. 4090 clock by Gilbert Rohde.

Fairgoers were in awe of all of the objects that filled Chicago's 1933 World's Fair. The modern style was no longer shifting from European to American but shifting within the American industrial design community. Whether it was a mass-produced item or a one of a kind commissioned object, the public saw plans for the future. As the Chicago Fair came to a close, the American public felt that it had seen the future of their country and they could not wait for what tomorrow would bring.

Conclusion

When Charles R. Richards and his committee returned from the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, America was considered “behind” in the art world. Realizing the marketing and design potential of tapping the French modern style for American consumers, various museums and department stores worked together to bring European art deco to United States. It took the work of many designers to adapt the style for the American market; creating something innovative and full of hope for a bright and prosperous future.

Towards the end of the Hoover Commission Report Charles R. Richards explains the importance of leadership in the arts.

“America should now take her place among those nations bent on expressing themselves. No greater recognition may be given the French for their courageous enterprise than our acceptance of their courteous challenge and opening our markets to them, which their creative initiative so richly deserves. America will slowly feel her way in this new expression of art but will not neglect it, just as she should maintain contact with all things created everywhere, developing at the same time her own creative genius.”⁸⁹

When Hoover declined France’s “courteous challenge” to participate in the 1925 Exposition, America appeared to be giving up on the modern style. In hindsight it is clear that Hoover’s decision made the nation and its designers and manufacturers more

⁸⁹ Commission on International exposition of modern decorative and industrial art, Paris, 1925, and Charles R. Richards. Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925. 1926. 35-36.

willing to learn from the French and develop new ideas and aesthetics from the blueprints of the 1925 Exposition. Hoover's rejection was a challenge to America to take new strides in decorative arts and one day have a pavilion of their own full of innovations to showcase America as a leader in the decorative arts. By the close of the 1933 Chicago Fair, it was clear to the world that United States had succeeded.

Americans today are still exposed to art deco daily from the spire of the Chrysler building, to exhibitions in museums throughout the country, to the Raymond Loewy *Columaire* in my living room. From France's Ruhlmann to America's Rohde, art deco still lives on.

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List of Figures

- Figure 1.** Cover of catalogue from Exposition Internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes. Taken by Lily Meehan June 13, 2012. Thomas J. Watson Library at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York City, NY.
- Figure 2.** Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann. “État cabinet.” from Kansas City show. Busch, Jason T., Catherine Futter, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, Stephen Harrison, Karin A. Jones, Martin P. Levy, Dawn Reid, Ethan Robey, Annamarie V. Sandecki, Jane Shadel Spillman, Kevin W. Tucker, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art. *Inventing the Modern World : Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. Pittsburgh, Pa. : Carnegie Museum of Art ; Kansas City, Mo; New York: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Skira Rizzoli, 2012, 223.
- Figure 3.** Le Corbusier. “l'Esprit Nouveau interior.” George H. Marcus. *Le Corbusier: Inside the Machine for Living*. New York: Monacelli Press, 2000, 31.
- Figure 4.** “Poster from Lord & Taylor Exposition.” Ryan, David, and Minneapolis Institute of Arts. “Cultural Emporiums : Advocates of Progressive Design.” In Minneapolis Institute of Arts . Minneapolis, Minn: Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 2007, 18-23.
- Figure 5.** Paul Frankl. “Skyscraper Desk.” Long, Christopher. *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, 70.
- Figure 6.** Paul Frankl. “Skyscraper Desk and Bookcase.” from Kansas City show. Busch, Jason T., Catherine Futter, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, Stephen Harrison, Karin A. Jones, Martin P. Levy, Dawn Reid, Ethan Robey, Annamarie V. Sandecki, Jane Shadel Spillman, Kevin W. Tucker, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art. *Inventing the Modern World : Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. Pittsburgh, Pa. : Carnegie Museum of Art ; Kansas City, Mo; New York: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Skira Rizzoli, 2012, 220.
- Figure 7.** Paul Frankl. “Skyscraper Bookcase.” Long, Christopher. *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, 74.
- Figure 8.** Donald Deskey. “Screen for the Frankl Galleries.” Long, Christopher. *Paul T. Frankl and Modern American Design*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, 77.

- Figure 9.** Donald Deskey and Witold Gordon. “First Mezzanine Lounge of Radio City Music Hall.” Hanks, David A., and Jennifer Toher. *Donald Deskey :Decorative Designs and Interiors*. 1st ed. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987, 109.
- Figure 10.** Donald Deskey and Witold Gordon. “First Mezzanine Lounge of Radio City Music Hall.” Hanks, David A., and Jennifer Toher. *Donald Deskey :Decorative Designs and Interiors*. 1st ed. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987, 112.
- Figure 11.** Kem Weber. “Bathroom from Macy’s International Exposition of Arts and Trade.” Gebhard, David, Harriette Von Breton, University of California, Santa Barbara, and Art Gallery. *Kem Weber: The Moderne in Southern California 1920 through 1941*. [Exhibition at] the Art Galleries, University of California, Santa Barbara, February 11 to March 23, 1969. Santa Barbara: Printed by Standard Print, 1969, 62.
- Figure 12.** Raymond Loewy. “Columaire.” Westinghouse Electric & Manufacturing Company, “Columaire.” Magazine advertisement. *The Saturday Evening Post*, March 7, 1931.
- Figure 13.** “Chicago World’s Fair Poster.” http://www.allposters.com/-st/Chicago-World-s-Fair-Posters_c50323_.htm.
- Figure 14.** “Willie Vocalite.” Schaut, Scott. *Robots of Westinghouse, 1924-Today*. Mansfield, Ohio: Scott Schautt, Mansfield Memorial Museum, 2006, 63.
- Figure 15.** Walter Dorwin Teague. “No. 1A Gift Kodak.” Taken by Bill Meehan on July 14, 2012.
- Figure 16.** Henry Dreyfuss. “Big Ben.” Western Clock Co., “Big Ben Chime Alarm Clock.” Magazine advertisement. *American Magazine*, October 1931.
- Figure 17.** Henry Dreyfuss. “Androck utensils for the Washburn Company.” Taken by Bill Meehan on July 24, 2012.
- Figure 18.** Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild. “Individual Canapé Plate No. 27001.” Taken by Bill Meehan on July 14, 2012.
- Figure 19.** Gilbert Rohde. “Vanity and Ottoman.” from Kansas City show. Busch, Jason T., Catherine Futter, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, Stephen Harrison, Karin A. Jones, Martin P. Levy, Dawn Reid, Ethan Robey, Annamarie V. Sandeck, Jane Shadel Spillman, Kevin W. Tucker, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art. *Inventing the Modern World : Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. Pittsburgh, Pa. :

Carnegie Museum of Art ; Kansas City, Mo; New York: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Skira Rizzoli, 2012, 232.

Figure 20. Gilbert Rohde. "No. 4090 Clock." from Kansas City show. Busch, Jason T., Catherine Futter, Regina Lee Blaszczyk, Stephen Harrison, Karin A. Jones, Martin P. Levy, Dawn Reid, Ethan Robey, Annamarie V. Sandecki, Jane Shadel Spillman, Kevin W. Tucker, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Museum of Art, and New Orleans Museum of Art. *Inventing the Modern World : Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851-1939*. Pittsburgh, Pa. : Carnegie Museum of Art ; Kansas City, Mo; New York: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art; Skira Rizzoli, 2012, 234.