

**Design****Art Deco at 100: love it or loathe it?**

A century after it was born at the Paris Exposition of 1925, the design style is up for review



Linda Boronkay's contemporary take on Art Deco in the Pierre Frey Salon at design show Wow!house last summer © James McDonald

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Once a year, interior designer Nicky Haslam creates a tea towel listing the things he finds “common”. The designer’s latest manifesto of aesthetic no-nos includes 1930s ceramicist Clarice Cliff, whose angular tea sets, emblazoned with zingy Jazz Age motifs, were the epitome of Art Deco. It’s a piquant indictment that captures the at once elitist and mass-market popularity of the Paris-born design style, whose defining characteristics continue to both inspire and confound as it turns 100 this year.

The name was coined at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Here, international pavilions showcased the very latest in [design](#), art and manufacturing: “reproductions, imitations and counterfeits of ancient styles” were banned. Exhibits including René Lalique’s cascading glass, Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann’s [luxurious furniture](#), Gio Ponti’s neoclassical ceramics and Orrefors glass, were all chosen for their originality and craftsmanship — a celebration of the truly modern.

“The Paris exhibition is like a city in a dream,” wrote Vogue’s London correspondent at the time. “[It] would give the psychoanalysts a run for their money.”

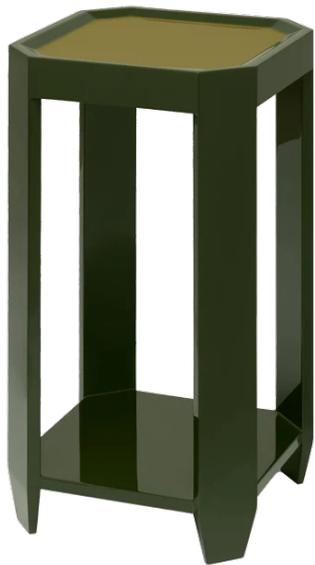


The entrance hall of Gayfere House, Smith Square, London, designed by Oliver Hill © Dell & Wainwright/RIBA Collections

What emerged was “a distinct, clear-cut style”, says Belgian designer Gert Voorjans. It was a reaction to the historicism of previous decades and had a genuine sense of novelty. “It expressed a desire for change after the first world war. People were shocked at the devastation and anxious about the future . . . They were looking for certainty and optimism.”

The exhibition also marked a turning point because it “prefigured a world of luxury, where the worlds of fashion and decorative art intersect”, says Paris-based antiques dealer turned collector Laurent-Alexis Guelfucci.

Art Deco subsequently gripped imaginations across the globe. Its foliate columns, chromium curves, glassy black surfaces and ziggurat motifs percolated down the design chain; from grand hotels and Mayfair apartments to Bakelite radios, fire surrounds, cinemas and bingo halls. As a result, Deco became diluted: which is why the cognoscenti are often sniffy about it.



Felix drinks table, by Campbell-Rey for The Lacquer Company



Chair by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, at the Crosta Smith Gallery

But is that unfair? For Guelfucci, there is no such thing as “good” or “bad” Art Deco. “It’s the difference between the innovators and the resulting mass production. It began as an elitist style, so popularisation was inevitable.” One of Guelfucci’s rarer finds, a desk by Elizabeth Eyre de Lanux, found its way into the collection of late Deco enthusiast Karl Lagerfeld. His clients include Marc Jacobs and Alaïa’s Pieter Mulier. “There’s a new generation of collectors enamoured with luxury and rare materials,” he says. They want to “relive an era that’s gone forever”.

Many contemporary designers are in agreement, taking inspiration from the style and reinterpreting it.



British designer Betty Joel with her revolving bed at the Royal Academy, London, 1935  
© Miller/Topical Press Agency/Hulton Archive/Getty Image



Art Deco silver cutlery set, c.1930, by JE Puiforcat at the Francis Janssens van der Maelen stand at this weekend's Brafa art and antiques fair in Brussels

“British Art Deco can be as stuffy as a dowager duchess,” says interior architect Martin Brudnizki. But when it’s done well, it is “the perfect balance between classicism and Modernism”. He’s a nostalgist for the salons of 1930s designers like Betty Joel, Oliver Hill or Syrie Maugham, where Bright Young Things traded cocktail-fuelled *aperçus* on satin sofas among mirror-lined walls.

“There was a materiality to the period which I find inspiring,” says Brudnizki. “It was all about craftsmanship.” Straw marquetry, inlaid oak, glossy bird’s eye maple, shagreen or vellum surfaces were combined with streamlined silhouettes. Too much Deco can look gaudy and contrived. Used in moderation, it can be superlatively chic. “You can dial the decoration up or down. Which makes it appealing — and modern,” he says.

**Too much Deco can look gaudy and contrived. In moderation, it can be superlatively chic. ‘You can dial the decoration up or down. Which makes it appealing — and modern’**

**Interior architect Martin Brudnizki**

Art Deco is the theme of this year’s Brafa art and antiques fair in Brussels (January 26-February 2). Highlights capture the movement’s breadth: a geometric silver tea set and cutlery by JE Puiforcat; a Daum table lamp embellished with a futuristic zigzag motif; Jean Dunand’s Japanese style “Swans and Water Lilies” lacquered screen. As art historian Bevis Hillier put it, Deco was “a total style” — from jewellery and interiors to architecture and fashion.

Designers “would work on everything from a sweeping staircase down to a teaspoon for a client. This obsession with detail in the pursuit of a unified *gesamtkunstwerk* holds an enduring appeal,” says designer Duncan Campbell. “These pieces can engender a spirit of . . . conviviality.”

Together with design partner Charlotte Rey, Campbell looked to 1930s exponent Jean Dunand for their new collection with The Lacquer Company.



In one of interior designer Trilbey Gordon's projects, vintage metal double doors lead into the cinema room © Kate Martin

Interior designer Bryan O'Sullivan's curvaceous furniture draws on his experience of redesigning the Painter's Room, a bar at Claridge's, where he trawled the historic hotel's cavernous store rooms for ideas. "It's the layering of details — mosaics with glass, a fluted chair leg — that I like," he says. Interior designer Trilbey Gordon uses inlaid metals and lacquered walls for a Deco feel in her residential projects. They are anything but alone: the influence can be seen across many a chubby sofa, inlaid screen or twinkling drinks cabinet.

Art Deco flourished across Europe — Italy's Novecento, Sweden's Swedish Grace, Amsterdam's Expressionist school were some of its variants — until the late 1930s, each country's heritage influencing its stylistic evolution. It also intertwined with Egyptomania, sparked by the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, which was expressed in sphinxes, palm leaves and hieroglyphs on white concrete ("snowcrete") facades.



Bryan O'Sullivan's revamped Painter's Room bar at Claridge's hotel, London © James McDonald

As well as Africa, Deco curves popped up around the world from Malaysia to Australia. At the Umaid Bhawan Palace (now a hotel) in Jodhpur, there are curvaceous baths framed by pale-green tiles and frescoes in the Indo-Deco style.

London-based architect and designer Charu Gandhi, founder of Elicyon studio, fell in love with the style as a child in Mumbai. The ocean-liner style balconies, towers and portholes of Marine Drive — inspired by luxury ships docked in the port — or in districts like Colaba were an early fascination that can be seen across her practice. "Every country has their own twist. Deco sits well with vernacular Indian architecture in a happy ecosystem."

The US didn't take part in the 1925 show but soon made up for it. Deco was a "cosier" version of Modernism, says interior designer and writer David Netto, its influence spreading from New York to Miami. "Deco gave a jazz-age energy to design that felt approachable." There was also "a lot of bad Deco," he argues. But the best is instantly recognisable: the needle-nosed Chrysler building or Donald Deskey's Radio City Music Hall.



London-based architect and designer Charu Gandhi with an Art Deco piano © Nick Rochowski



An Art Deco piece in a Mayfair apartment at 60 Curzon by Gandhi's practice Elicyon © Nick Rochowski

It didn't have to be showy. Rosario Candela was the Sicilian-born architect behind New York's most patrician apartment buildings on Park Avenue and Sutton Place and the subject of Netto's latest book, with co-authors Paul Goldberger and Peter Pennoyer. He approached Deco with "restraint — and refinement", says Netto, fusing angularity with neoclassical detailing.

In London, "Art Deco has a different reputation", says dealer Marine Edith Crosta, most of whose clients are from the US and Europe. "Some people still think it's all about brown varnished furniture, partly because a lot of it has been badly restored. But that's changing." Her apartment pays tribute to the era with a sculptural fireplace inspired by architect Djo-Bourgeois.



'Veiled Chaise' by Linda Boronkay © Charles Burnand

“Values have risen consistently, making it appealing to investors,” she continues, citing the work of Jean-Michel Frank. A console by Frank sold for \$630,000 at Christie’s in 2022. Even later Deco-inspired pieces such as Jean Royère’s 1950s Ours Polaire seating — a squasy hug of upholstery — can fetch astral sums. In 2023, a suite sold for \$3.42mn at Christie’s New York.

Designer Linda Boronkay is currently working on the restoration of a 1930s hotel in the south of France. “As designers we’re always looking for ways to reinvent ourselves. Deco was a [style] of experimentation,” says Boronkay, whose interest was kindled by childhood excursions to antiques shops in her native Budapest. That spirit “of adventure — and newness” is worth celebrating, says Boronkay, whether it’s mass market or top tier. It’s a century of enduring chic.

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