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*We go antiquing with  
the experts of Art  
Deco Mumbai.*



If Malabar Hill's period furniture store Mahendra Doshi's is a cruise ship docked at the lip of the Arabian Sea, a closet in an inner room is the loveliest steamer trunk in its hold. Made of wine-dark teak with softly rounded corners, its vertical lines – which allow it to stand so much taller than it really is – are bound by gleaming aluminium and brass strips running around the middle. It's a little Egyptian, a little nautical; very Bombay, and very Art Deco.

So are the people looking at it. "You're [Art Deco Mumbai!](#)" exclaims Chiki Doshi, proprietor of the store, on encountering Atul K, proprietor of the popular Facebook page and Instagram account. ADM began early last year as a social media campaign that share its team's love for Bombay deco. Their beautiful pictures and breezy historical updates have earned them loyal fans – including, just four days previously, Chiki.

### **Sir Chris Pattern**

We ask the ADM team to come antiquing with us in search of the inside story. Between the 1930s and '50s, people inhabiting the locomotive balconies of Marine Drive and sunburst facades of the Oval strip had, of course, private Deco to match the outer trappings. There were tile patterns, gate grilles, window panes, and above all, Deco decor. "Many of these old, high-ceilinged homes retain the furniture originally made for them," Atul tells us.

But many didn't do so. "In the '60s and '70s, people were throwing away Deco furniture," Chiki says. Irani cafés were getting rid of Bentwood chairs; stunning carved almirahs with clear glass drawers were being orphaned; grannies in Chira Bazaar were putting Burma teak sofas with perfectly finished ovoid armrests on the footpath. Some of this loot has stayed afloat in city markets, buoyant and hopeful as the age in which they were made.

### **Ply Me A River**

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On Mutton Street off Muhammad Ali Road, Deco furniture pops up in shops both small and big, although there are none that specialise in the period. The minder at Three Gates Corner assures us that a fluted magazine bin, polished ebony and possessed of a suspiciously soft lower half, is "half teak, half English ply – they imported



plywood 80 years ago." At National Arts, Mr Moinuddin practically hugs a pair of fat, dignified red-leather armchairs he's working on, girded by curving armrests and decorated with squiggly wooden rolls at their base, "at least 96 years old." His assistant shaves away a bit of polish to assure us that we're looking at original teak. "Ah, that grain," Atul says, with a sigh of satisfaction.

At RK Arts, Atul's colleague Prathyaksha finds a stool with the mango-like golden sheen of mid-20th century furniture, and a sweet round top held up by trifurcated little legs. "There's an exuberance to the lines of Art Deco that draws your eye upwards," Atul explains. Seen in the midst of colonial reproductions and faux Mughal geometry, the appeal has never been clearer. Deco geometry is demanding, but even at its most elaborate – wrought iron carved into confluences of semi-circles to imitate 'frozen fountains,' for example – it is never florid.

But there's also a mystery to Deco, an I-know-it-when-I-see-it quality that comes from its many crossovers with the period modernism of the early 20th century – think Corbusier and Chandigarh – and the neo-classical, Art Nouveau style, so popular with wealthy Indians who liked to imagine they were Rossetti heroines. "This is French modern," exclaims Asif of the venerable Taherally's, as we stand around a glass-fronted cabinet, bound by austere wooden arches, that looks like it could have belonged in an early Guru Dutt movie. "You have to know the difference!"

"The styles overlap," Aakriti – architect-in-training and social media maven of ADM – whispers as Asif marches us out of his store and to Art Centre across the lane. "They'll make any kind of Art Deco you want," Asif says and va(r)nishes. They don't have to: among their dusty treasures, a thunderingly heavy cupboard, topped with 'ziggurated' wood – those familiar boxy triangles – awaits us, looking like it contains a kidnapped Devika Rani waiting to wreak her vengeance. (Alas, it doesn't.) Behind it, a powder-blue console with the same pointed arches that exasperated Asif sits in the middle of its own dream. "How very Miami," Atul murmurs. "How very *Sunshine!*" we hear, as Aakriti spots something else – a window grille identical to the ones you will still see if you pass Sunshine Apartments on the Oval strip. We are ray-diant with joy.

### **(Sun)Burst Practices**

A Deen Dayal print at Phillips Antiques shows an aerial view of 1890s Mumbai, its quiet coastline missing Marine Drive, and the Bombay Baroda & Central India railway stretching over the fields and grounds that would become the Churchgate precinct fifty years later. Proprietor Farooq Issa advises us to look for Deco at The Planters Chair, the Phillips concern on Reay Road (because the snazziest thing in his store is his mod olive-green knitted tie). "Ask for Mr DeSouza there."

Should you give in to this eastern promise, know that the Phillips and Mahendra Doshi warehouses sit side by side, both assuredly full of original Bombay deco furniture. "There's a huge demand for Deco again," Chiki Doshi tells us, engaged in the middle of a full-scale examination of a mid-20th century piece of statuary: a flapper-like nymph drinks from a very Viennese fountain of glass, carefully crafted to look like falling water. So should we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past? For some Deco optimism, we'll take that oar. And that steamer trunk of a closet.

**Getting there:** Mahendra Doshi's, basement, Giriraj, Malabar Hill, Art Deco closet with aluminium and brass fittings, Rs 1,80,000, call [23630526](tel:23630526).

Phillips Antiques, opposite Regal Cinema, Madam Cama Road, Deen Dayal print for Rs 2500; also see The Planter's Chair, Warehouse #13, 1803 Fort Road, next to Godrej Vegetable Oil Mills, Wadala East, call [24121929](tel:24121929).

RK Arts, 1 Mutton St, Mandvi, Art Deco stool for Rs 4500, call [9870865711](tel:9870865711).

Three Gates Corner, 32 Mutton St, teak/English ply bin, Rs 5500, call [9892266721](tel:9892266721).

National Arts, 47 Mutton Street, Rs 30,000 for a pair of Art Deco armchairs, call [9819435188](tel:9819435188).

Art Centre, 13 Mutton Street, Art Deco specialists, call [23474834](tel:23474834).

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