

Art deco's lasting legacy in Asia

Jazz Age brought iconic design style to Shanghai, Mumbai, Tokyo



This art deco mansion in Shanghai was designed by Laszlo Ede Hudec, who also designed the city's landmark Park Hotel. © Getty Images

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Nearly a century ago, a new style swept into the design vocabulary of the world. Clearly distinguished by the use of vivid colors and geometric shapes, art deco -- short for *arts decoratifs*, and initially called *style moderne* -- was introduced to the world in 1925 at an industrial design exhibition in Paris.

In Paris and Brussels, though, art deco style had already come into vogue, and later spread to other parts of Europe and the world in the immediate years after the expo. Atul Kumar, founder of the documentation and conservation project Art Deco Mumbai, says, "The expo fired the

imagination of the most influential designers and architects of the time. It was about clean geometric motifs, with straight lines and elegant curves, and not ornate and carved like earlier styles, and people embraced it readily."

With the end of World War I ushering in an economic boom, the time was ripe for this kind of design and decorative arts style. The world was excited with the progress in trade and commerce, thanks to easier train and ship travel. European and British architects lost no time in taking art deco with them to the Americas, and even Africa and Asia. Kumar points out that it is no coincidence that some of the most significant art deco cities are (or were) important ports. "Trade brought prosperity, and prosperity bought aspiration. People everywhere were in search of the new and the modern."

In the U.S., it also coincided with the glitz and glamour of the Jazz Age -- a term coined by novelist Scott Fitzgerald, and best embodied in his classic "The Great Gatsby" -- and the Roaring '20s, when young people, particularly women, were giving shape to their idea of a more modern and progressive lifestyle. Art deco brought with it not just the use of streamlined forms and sleek shapes, but also newer materials like glass, chrome, brass and terra cotta. But it still allowed for whimsy and playfulness, with its quirky curves that wrap around balconies and sunburst motifs on facades.

Not surprisingly, through the 1920s and '30s, art deco influenced not just architecture, but also furniture and fashion, cars and luxury home decor. But its impact was greatest, and most enduring, on architecture. It is a little-known fact that after Miami, Mumbai has the largest collection of buildings in the art deco style. And in this part of Asia, with several cities like Singapore, Manila and Phnom Penh boasting a rich art deco history, Shanghai is considered the first among equals.

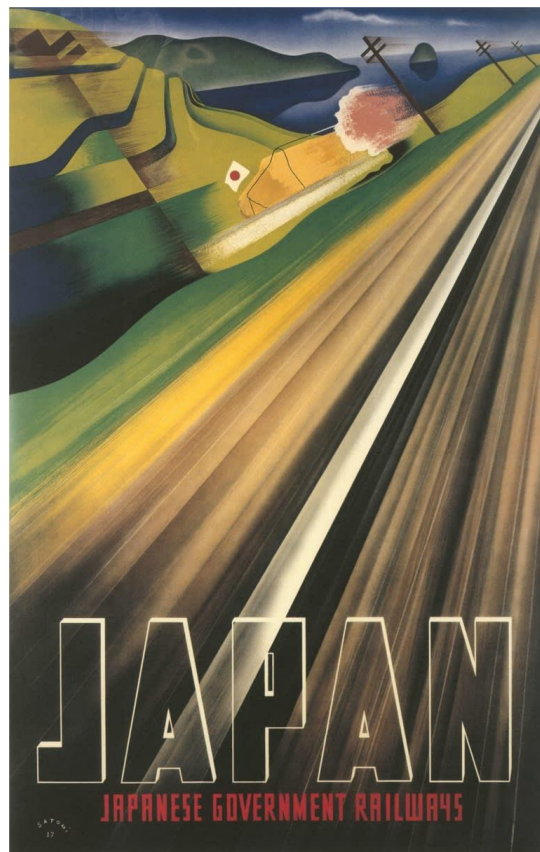


Top: The lobby of Shanghai's Peace Hotel, built in the 1920s by businessman and hotelier Victor Sassoon.
Bottom: An old luggage label for Shanghai's Park Hotel, which was completed in 1934. © Getty Images

Tina Mani Kanagaratnam, co-founder of Historic Shanghai, a heritage preservation society, and an art deco expert, says, "Shanghai is perhaps the most international of art deco cities -- it has more buildings designed by architects from around the world than any other: Hungarian, Russian, British, French, Chinese, Belgian, American, Spanish, Japanese."

While Japan does not have many stellar architectural examples of art deco, it readily embraced the style in art and home furnishings. From an iconic travel poster 1937, created to showcase a high-speed railway -- the train just a blur of color and lush scenery in the background -- to images of *moga* -- the modern Japanese girl, red lipstick and chic bob hair -- in paintings and prints, Japan deco assumed its own distinct shape.

Kanagaratnam says, "One of the characteristics of art deco globally is that it takes on local characteristics. So in places like Shanghai, Nanjing and Singapore, we have wonderful examples of Chinese art deco, with Chinese design elements used on modernist buildings, and Chinese-style buildings re-imagined in a modernist way."



A Japanese travel poster from 1937 (Getty Images)



The Tokyo Metropolitan Teien Art Museum building was previously the residence of Prince Yasuhiko Asaka and his family from 1933 to 1947. (Getty Images)

Kumar concurs, saying that in every region, people were free to add on local elements to make it their own. "In Bombay deco, there are plenty of what is called 'Swadeshi Moderne' elements, like the lotus flower -- India's national flower -- and the Hindu swastika symbol on top of residential and even commercial buildings," he explains.

In the U.S., art deco flourished until the Great Depression, and then waning in popularity along with a crash in economic optimism. It stayed trendy through the 1930s in other parts of the world, particularly Asia. Kumar says that art deco has been in public consciousness in the last decade or so, thanks to heritage conservation societies that have sprung up all over the world. Popular movies such as "The Great Gatsby" (2013) and "Chicago" (2002) -- both set in the Jazz Age -- have also kept public interest alive.



Top: An example of "Bombay deco" in Mumbai. Bottom: A bas-relief detail in the "Swadeshi Moderne" style in Mumbai. (Photos courtesy of Art Deco Mumbai)

In an introduction to this style, London's Victoria and Albert Museum states, "Its strength comes from its willingness to embrace the duality of tradition and modernity, marrying luxury and function in a versatile way." Kanagaratnam says, "In Shanghai, it's a reminder of the city's first Golden Age, an age of glamour, sophistication and internationalism, and of progress and modernity. So much so that many new buildings in modern-day Shanghai, including skyscrapers, are built using art deco style -- we call it 'deco echo.'"

Art Deco's fortunes may wax and wane, but the style can never truly go out of vogue; aren't glamour and sophistication timeless?

THE WORLD'S BEST ART DECO CITIES

Miami, U.S.

Ocean Drive, the boulevard along Miami Beach, is a protected heritage precinct with over 900 art deco buildings, including some landmarks. Given its prime location facing the Atlantic Ocean, the architecture includes several "nautical deco" elements such as porthole windows and ship railings.

Mumbai, India

While the best is clustered in the commercial south Mumbai neighborhoods of Marine Drive, Colaba and Oval Maidan, "Bombay deco" can also be spotted in the central residential suburbs of Dadar and Matunga. Mumbai's Victorian Gothic and Art Deco Ensembles was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status in 2018.

Napier, New Zealand

Most of the over 140 art deco buildings in this small town on the North Island of New Zealand were built right after the violent 1931 earthquake razed much of the structures there to the ground. In a nod to its indigenous

culture, art deco here embraces Maori motifs such as fern fronds, along with classic features like sunbeams and ziggurats.

Shanghai, China

Shanghai's art deco legacy goes back to the 1930s when it was one of the richest and most vibrant Asian cities. A stroll along the Bund reveals art deco gems where the architecture incorporates Chinese design elements like lattice windows and stone lions.

New York City, U.S.

For some of the most iconic art deco structures, look no further than the Big Apple -- think the Empire State Building, the Chrysler building and the Waldorf Astoria Hotel. Art deco evolved and flourished here at a time when the city was beginning to emerge as a hub for economic and cultural innovation.

Paris, France

In art deco's original cradle, theaters, hotels and even large department stores sported this style with elan. The most unexpected delights, though, are found at the splendid swimming pools like Piscine Georges-Vallerey and the Piscine Pontoise Quartier Latin, with their rich art deco facades and exquisite mosaics.

Casablanca, Morocco

Known to be an open-air architecture museum, downtown Casablanca has a profusion of buildings in various styles created during its time as a French protectorate (1912 -- 56). The Morocco art deco style -- with many restored classics -- is known as neo-Moorish, and incorporates some elements of Art Nouveau.

Havana, Cuba

Art deco arrived in Cuba in the 1920s along with American architects, as well as movies and music. First seen in residential buildings, art deco style

soon spread to hotels and hospitals alike, cinemas and even briefly, churches. Although many buildings are poorly maintained now, hidden between the old and decaying, Havana is still an art deco gem.

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