

ART DECO ON THE MOVE

by Edwin Heathcote

*Empress of Britain, c. 1930–31, poster for Canadian Pacific Railways, designed by
J.R. Tooby, colour lithograph, ht 59cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London*



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Art deco is a difficult style to pin down, but the many forms of this elegant and versatile movement are united by an interest in glamour and travel

Art deco is one of those styles we think we instinctively recognise. Yet it is one of the most diverse and wide-ranging fashions, and there is no single form of the style. Instead there is a period that stretches from the early 1920s into the early 1950s, a myriad of styles and formal approaches, and objects as varied as stepped skyscrapers, streamlined locomotives, angular flapper dresses, cars, aeroplanes, and Hollywood dance routines. If these items have one thing in common, though, it is that they are all going somewhere.

There are the Aztec-stepped movie palaces and skyscrapers stacking up in layers. There are streamlined buildings with curving corners that make it seem as if they could float like boats or cruise like cars – and then there are the extravagant cars themselves, with billowing wheel arches, gleaming chrome, and arcing fenders. There are dresses adorned with tiny glass beads and tassels to make them sway in a Charleston and there are cocktail rings designed to look like engine parts. Art deco is the style of an age when travel and motion was itself synonymous with style. Trains, ocean liners, and aeroplanes were being radically redesigned and refined and it was not only their speed that was celebrated, but also the in-between world of the journey itself.

Art deco defined the space between embarkation and destination and the era between the two World Wars, bridging the gap between historicism and modernism, between the opulent luxury of the *fin de siècle* and the stripped-down modernism of the Bauhaus. It flourished just after a time when travel was always an expensive luxury and just before it would become a mass-market drudge.

Although there were many stylistic foreshadowings, from Frank Lloyd Wright in Chicago to Charles Rennie Mackintosh in Glasgow, as well as the Vienna Secession, and

architects such as Henri Sauvage and Auguste Perret in Paris, art deco really arrived with the Exposition des Arts Decoratifs held in Paris in 1925. Far from exemplifying speed, the show itself arrived a decade late. It had been planned for 1915 but was postponed, firstly because of the war and then because of a shortage of materials in the early 1920s. But when it finally happened, it was a roaring success. It was a show designed to relaunch a nation, to remind the world that France was the natural home of luxury goods, glamour, and craftsmanship. Most of the world, from Buenos Aires to Beirut and Baltimore had bought into the Beaux-Arts and the interiors of the gilded age were Louis XIV all over. But this new vision of luxury was responding to the speed, spatial complexity, and fragmentation of the modern metropolis.

The world had been eagerly waiting for Paris to set the new style, and here it was – buildings that drew on influences from the Mayans and ancient Egypt (the latter very much in vogue after Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922), from Africa and from China – and spiced them up with cubism, constructivism, and central European modernism. With its lavish decoration, aspirational luxury, and elegant urbanity, art deco was both exclusive and populist, avant-garde and commercial. And its ultimate *Gesamtkunstwerk* was the ocean liner. These huge, sleek ships became hybrids of technics and craft, art and design. Even here it was landlocked Paris whose influence spread across the oceans. The *Normandie*, launched in 1935, was the high point of art deco and A.M. Cassandre's famous poster with the ship's prow looming like a seaborne skyscraper remains one of its defining images.

The *Normandie* poster is among the artefacts brought together for the V&A's new blockbuster, 'Ocean Liners: Speed and Style' (3 February–10 June). It isn't confined to art deco, but the style certainly defined the most



'Salambo' dress, 1925, designed by Jeanne Lanvin (1867–1946), silk georgette, glass beads, chiffon, length 111cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

glamorous era of ocean travel. Alongside the *Normandie* was the *Bremen* (1933), an example of the more sober German version of art deco and designed in part by Hitler's favourite architect Paul Ludwig Troost (who had designed Hitler's apartments in the Reich Chancellery). The ship embodied Nazi self-image every bit as much as the *Normandie* embodied that of France. Then there were the snazzy Italian twins, the *Rex* and the *Conte di Savoia* (with a fittingly jaunty poster designed by Giovanni Patrone). The V&A exhibition attempts to show how all-encompassing this ocean-liner style was, going far beyond the normal nautical architecture. Luggage, food, and the trains that brought the passengers to the decks were also a critical part of the journey.

As the V&A exhibition makes clear, shipboard-style spread beyond deck to the docks and the cities as shipping operators ploughed their profits into prestigious buildings. Liverpool's *Three Graces* appear, appropriately, as a trio of docked liners. Even London's Cockspar Street, off Trafalgar Square, was lined by a series of glamorous shipping agency offices.

The United States was, in this as in everything else, exceptional. Americans were happy to let Europeans arrive on European liners (and happy to travel in Old-World luxury back to the Old World), but turned their attention inland. Among the era's greatest buildings were the stations – Union Station in St Louis with its ornate vaults, Cincinnati with its ceiling of concentric coloured rings and illuminated pilasters, Philadelphia's austere, black-clad Suburban Station and lofty 30th St Station, and Union Station in Los Angeles.

Trains also became influential symbols of the age. In France, just as Cassandre's poster of the *Normandie* defined a particular graphic sense of an era, Pierre Masseur's poster for the French state railway fetishised the engineering of the locomotive into a sleek black piston. Louis XIV famously said '*l'État, c'est moi*'; the front of Masseur's steam engine has emblazoned across its red buffers 'ETAT'. This is the modern state embodied, and the word 'Exactitude' above it sums up the engineering precision and efficiency of the railway as a metaphor for the modern nation.

The confluence of art deco, travel fantasy, and consumption was made explicit in *Speed of Transportation* (1929), Herman Sachs's mural in Bullocks department store on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. Here the cruise liner,



Art deco bracelet (c. 1925), Oscar Heyman & Brothers, emeralds and diamonds, mounted in platinum, length 18cm, Sandra Cronan London



Bar à ski, c. 1929, designed by Paul Dupré-Lafon (1900–71), lacquered wood, leather, bronze, 58.5 × 112 × 49.5cm, 18 Davies Street Gallery, London

steam engine, airship, and aeroplane speed towards the figure of Mercury, and stylised waves, clouds, steam, and smoke merge into an abstract background. From diners to airstream trailers, the streamlined profile of engines and railway cars leeches into interiors and, ultimately, entire cities. US post offices mimicked stations in their desire to convey a sense of speed. Just look at the eagle that is still, in modified form, the logo of the organisation – its beak cuts through the air. Or consider the sleek logo of Greyhound, the bus company, and its aeroplane-like windows and striated stainless steel and aluminium bodywork.

Cars too, with their remarkable, curvaceous bodywork, inhabited the zone in between engineering and architecture. The names tell you as much as the forms: Chrysler's 1934 'Airflow' and 1941 'Thunderbolt', Studebaker's 1934 'Landcruiser', Phantom's sinister-looking 'Corsair'. These were cars that wanted to fly – in an era when planes were still kind of clunky. If you follow the line from *Speed*, designed by Harriet Frishmuth, to René Lalique's *Spirit of the Wind* hood ornament, and then follow it to Prometheus, the sculpture designed by Paul Manship for the Rockefeller Center, and the Chrysler Building, there is an argument to be made that art deco is an extension of the car mascot, the corporate logo for the idea of speed.

If mascots embody the ideals of an age in miniature form then so do toys. The interwar era was an age of miniaturisation as well as hypertrophied engineering. Train sets and model boats were the aspirational toys of the era, but model ships, as the V&A exhibition illustrates, became

an industry in their own right, as the shipping lines commissioned exquisite replicas of their newest liners.

In the 1930s a streamlined architecture emerged from art deco in which buildings seemed to absorb the desire to travel into their very structures. Architects embraced streamlining with an eccentric verve – after all, what can be less mobile than a building? Yet designers succeeded in imbuing hotels, cinemas, and apartment blocks with the thrill of speed, and an architecture of the seaside developed, with buildings that seemed ready to let go of their moorings and speed into the ocean. Erich Mendelsohn, a refugee from Germany, designed Bexhill's De La Warr Pavilion as a modernist cultural cruiser, a seductively streamlined dash of modernity in a fusty seaside town. A little way along the coast, Brighton's bus shelters display the same elegantly-curving prows, while in St Leonard's-on-Sea, a 1938 mansion block called Marine Court clearly resembles an elegantly docked cruiseship.



Panel from The Rape of Europa for the first-class grand salon of the Normandie, 1934, designed by Jean Dupas and made by Jacques-Charles Champigneulle, verre églomisé, Miottel Museum, Berkeley, California

Courtesy Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts



Cabinet, 1942–46, designed by Eugène Printz (1889–1948), ebony, sycamore, brass, 100×250×43cm, Galerie Marcellbac

The nautical influence was an absolutely formative element in modernist architecture. Le Corbusier showed photos of cruise-liners in his books to explain the inadequacy of contemporary architecture in comparison with these behemoths of engineering. The seafaring influence in Villa Savoye (1928–31) could hardly be clearer, with the roof as deck, the slender columns replacing solid walls, tubular handrails, ribbon windows, and a roof sculpture reminiscent of a funnel. Similarly Walter Gropius's Bauhaus building in Dessau and the Isokon Building in London revel in their maritime metaphors.

Although art deco was and is immensely popular – it is perhaps the last genuinely popular architectural style – it was a more austere, stripped-back form of modernism that eventually emerged triumphant. But this was not before art deco had infiltrated every aspect of culture – a phenomenon that lasted well into the 1950s, even though it was usually called something else by then. Just as the stepped, Aztec-influenced tower and the sun-ray window had become suburban clichés by the late 1930s, streamlining was applied to everything from bathroom fittings to staplers. The rise of art deco coincided with the explosion of the consumer economy, the proliferation of cars and household appliances and Hollywood's imagining of everything from space travel to fantasy dance-spectaculars.

Brilliant designers including Raymond Loewy, Norman Bel Geddes and Donald Deskey applied streamlined styling to both genuine innovations and mass-market consumables. The results were occasionally visionary and

sometimes pure kitsch. Bel Geddes's remarkable designs including teardrop-shaped cars and swept-wing planes that exemplify the optimism of an era when travel was speeding up and becoming more glamorous. The culmination of the designer's work was the 'Futurama' pavilion at the World's Fair in New York in 1939. He had graduated from 'streamlining' to 'dreamlining', setting the scene for mid-century sci-fi design and the transition from a design scene defined by travel-glamour to one driven by the emerging military-industrial complex.

This was the architecture and design of the first age of mass entertainment and truly globalised mass production. The movies showed the masses, for the first time, what luxury living looked like. The seductive sets designed by architect Cedric Gibbons (who was married to actress Dolores del Rio) formed the backdrop to romantic fantasies featuring Jean Harlow and Greta Garbo. Art deco was the de rigueur backdrop for global glamour.

And at the heart of art deco is the desire for travel, for speed, and for escape. Cruise liners took art deco around the world. The ferry terminal at Hong Kong's Tsim Sha Tsui, the Italian modernism of Asmara, the De La Warr Pavilion, the Empire State Building, and the curving corner of Jerry's Famous Deli in Miami Beach are united by an architecture that embodied the luxury and thrill of travel like no other before or since.

Edwin Heathcote is the architecture and design critic of the *Financial Times*.