# American Modern

1925-1940 • DESIGN FOR A NEW AGE



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BY J. STEWART JOHNSON

For the AFA:

Publication Coordinator: Michaelyn Mitchell

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The American Federation of Arts is a nonprofit art museum service organization that provides traveling art exhibitions and educational, professional, and technical support programs developed in collaboration with the museum community. Through these programs, the AFA seeks to strengthen the ability of museums to enrich the public's experience and understanding of art.

#### EXHIBITION ITINERARY TO DATE

The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York, New York May 16, 2000-January 7, 2001

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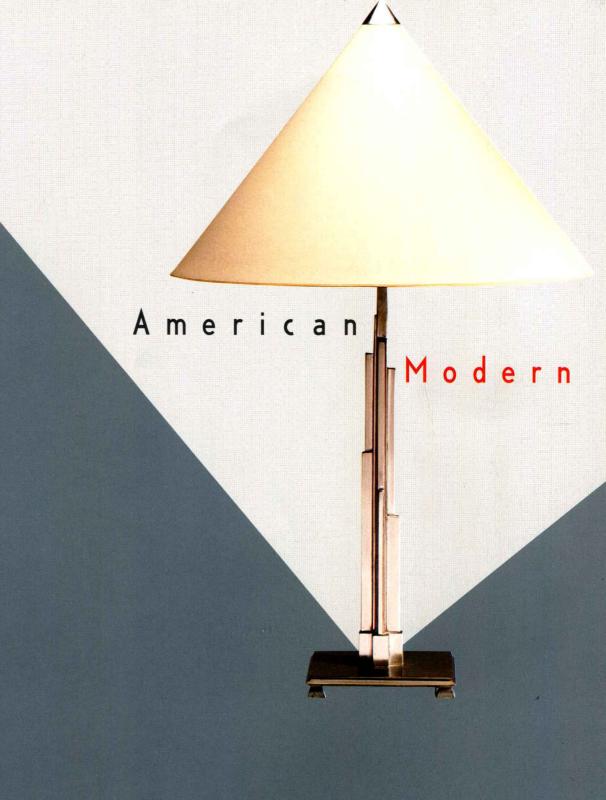
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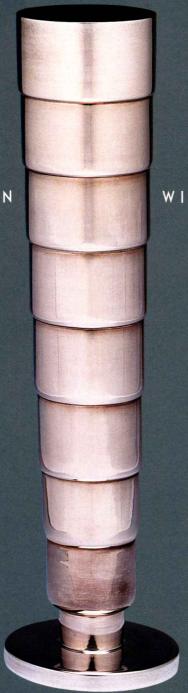
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WITH THE

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OF ARTS

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### Acknowledgments

American Modern, 1925-1940: Design for a New Age continues an ongoing cooperation between The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Federation of Arts for traveling exhibitions designed to share the museum's rich and varied resources with other museums around the country. This, the first traveling exhibition of selections from the Modern Design and Architecture Collection, has been made possible by combining the Metropolitan's holdings with those of the John C. Waddell Collection. A recent and very important promised gift to the museum, the John C. Waddell Collection is exceptional in its thorough representation of the work of the first generation of modernist designers living and working in America. The Metropolitan has had a long history of involvement in the espousal of modern design, most notably in presenting landmark exhibitions of American industrial design in 1929, 1934, and 1940 and by acquiring important examples over the years. The John C. Waddell Collection greatly enriches the museum's holdings in this area, increasing both their depth and breadth. We are delighted that these works and the curatorial concept that unifies them are being given national exposure.

In addition to our gratitude for the generosity of Mr. Waddell, we express deep appreciation to William S. Lieberman, Jacques and Natasha Gelman Chairman of the Department of Modern Art, for his ongoing support; and to J. Stewart Johnson, consultant for modern design and architecture, for his selection of the works and for his authorship of the catalogue.

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Philippe de Montebello Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Serena Rattazzi Director, American Federation of Arts

## Design for a New Age

### I. Awakening

As a major ally of France in World War I, the United States was offered a prime site in the great 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. There was, however, one condition. The world's fairs of the past had been showcases providing national exhibitors opportunities to display their most impressive wares. The emphasis was on the skill of each nation's craftsmen and—more important, as one of the chief aims of these fairs was the promotion of trade—the prodigious capabilities of the new machinery developed in the Industrial Revolution to mass-produce goods for sale. Objects might be executed in any style, and the great majority of those exhibited were in fact based on historic models. Now, however, the French imposed a new set of ground rules. In setting the conditions for participation in the 1925 fair, the organizers stipulated:

Works admitted to the Exposition must show new inspiration and real originality. They must be executed and presented by artists, artisans, and manufacturers who have created models and by editors who represent the modern decorative and industrial arts. Reproductions, imitations, and counterfeits of ancient styles will be strictly prohibited.<sup>1</sup>

The operative word was *modern*. Faced with this demand for modernity, Herbert Hoover, then United States Secretary of Commerce, canvassed educators, businessmen, and prominent figures in the American art establishment and on the basis of their advice declined the French invitation. His advisors' judgment: there was no modern design in America.

As Charles R. Richards—a leading educator who would head the American commission that Hoover subsequently sent to Paris to report on the exposition and its implications for American industry—wrote: "A review

Fig. 1. Catalogue cover of the 1926 touring exhibition of objects culled from the 1925 Paris exposition. Classical maidens, antelope, and baskets of flowers were favorite Art Deco motifs.

A Selected Collection of Objects from the International Exposition of Modern Decorative & Industrial Art



Organized and Exhibited by
The American Association of Museums

of the arts for the past century shows little but a varied kaleidoscope of the older motives, barren for the most part of new ideas and lacking wholly in coordination of effort toward distinct modern styles." He went on to explain, and to some extent excuse, this judgment:

In America we assumed our place as a nation practically at the time of the industrial revolution. We had no artistic tradition except those of the mother countries where the old order was shortly to turn into the new. Furthermore, the material needs of life absorbed all the energies of our people. As we expanded and became prosperous the genius of leadership was absorbed in the development of our natural resources, the expansion of our railroads, the opening up of our mines, the felling of our forests, the building of factories and the organization of our industries. Naturally, under such conditions, we looked to the old world for our artistic leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Richards wrote this in 1922. The book in which it appeared was not published until 1929, and by then the attitude toward design had already begun to change in America. It would continue to do so over the next decade, and at an increasing pace. By the time the United States entered World War II, a pioneer group of American designers, abandoning historical ornament, employing new materials and technologies, and working closely with industry, had developed a new style that was at once modern and recognizably American. At first much of their work reflected the catalytic influence of the Paris fair. Quickly, however, they moved away from the elegance of the French Art Deco style, first toward the clean, uncluttered lines and pure geometric forms espoused by the German Bauhaus and then toward the less mechanistic approach of Scandinavian functionalism. Still, though the American designers were aware of and influenced by European design currents—and indeed many of them had emigrated from Europe—as their work evolved, it took on a distinct character of its own.

The emphasis of the French Art Deco style was on luxury. Its products were typically characterized by costly materials and fine workmanship. Its designers primarily aimed their wares at a small, affluent clientele. In contrast, American designers sought to capture the broadest possible market, substituting machine production for handcraftsmanship. And although the Americans came to assimilate much of the design aesthetic of the Bauhaus, they were not motivated by the social idealism that lay behind it. Their aim was not so much to bring good design within reach of the masses—a goal the Germans were ultimately unable to achieve—as to produce fresh, affordable products that would appeal to a rapidly expanding middle class. In seeking to create objects appropriate to life in twentieth-century America, and in response to the specific social and economic conditions that prevailed here, they forged a new style that to a great extent would transform the American domestic landscape.

When, in fact, the Paris fair opened, it became apparent that the modern spirit the French had demanded of the participants was not so revolutionary after all. The great majority of French displays bore a reassuring resemblance to familiar objects from the past, specifically those produced from the end of the eighteenth



Fig. 2. Pavilion of the Paris department store Grand Magasins du Louvre at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. Studium Louvre was the store's design component.

through the early nineteenth centuries. Unexpected, sometimes violent, colors lent many of the exhibits an air of originality, as did occasional jagged decorative patterns derived from Cubism; but the forms to which they were applied, from buildings to small decorative objects, more often than not were based on a pared-down Neoclassicism. The pavilions erected by major French commercial interests—manufacturers such as Lalique and Sèvres, the design studios run by the large Parisian department stores, and the leading *ensembliers* Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann and Süe et Mare, who might be thought of as the *hauts couturiers* of the decorative arts—were all symmetrically planned, and most incorporated conventional motifs in their decoration (figs. 2, 3). Pilasters, dancing nymphs, and elegant animals in low relief (antelope, deer, and borzois were especially favored); cornucopias and baskets of flowers; swags of drapery; and representations of fountains in wrought iron, ceramic, or glass—all these abounded. The exhibits within the pavilions, often arranged as room settings, tended to be formal; and the great majority of furniture was formal as well. Grand dining rooms were featured (fig. 4), and the decorative schemes of many of the salons were centered on massive commodes, frequently inlaid with rare woods, ivory, or mother-of-pearl. The majesty of commodes and bedsteads was in some cases further emphasized by placing them on low platforms (fig. 5). Seating furniture was upholstered in tapestry or



Fig. 3. The Ruhlmann pavilion at the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. Rigidly symmetrical and decorated with relief panels of dancing maidens, it was conceived as the villa of an art collector.

silk. Elaborate crystal chandeliers and wall sconces lit the rooms, the walls of which were hung with silk or richly patterned paper. After the devastation of the war, which had destroyed much of the industry devoted to the decorative arts, shutting down workshops and in many cases claiming the lives of craftsmen, the organizers of the fair obviously saw the 1925 exposition as their great chance to reestablish the hegemony of France in the *industries de luxe*.

There was another side to the fair. Amid the welter of essentially conservative pavilions, there was a bare handful of structures designed in a truly modern spirit. Konstantine Melnikov's Russian pavilion featured walls painted a symbolic red, large areas of glass, and an exterior staircase that sliced diagonally through the

building, dividing it into two sharply angled triangles (fig. 6). Robert Mallet-Stevens's information and tourist pavilion was surmounted by an uncompromisingly geometric clock tower (fig. 7); and the sculptors Jan and

Joel Martel provided four "Cubist" trees, the limbs of which were cantilevered slabs of reinforced concrete, for one of the little gardens that punctuated the fairgrounds (fig. 8). They were all ridiculed by press and public alike.

The most notorious intruder in the exposition's otherwise vast homogeneous sea of Art Deco was Le Corbusier's Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau (fig. 9). A mock-up of a model duplex apartment unit, it had an asymmetrical plan, stark window walls, and a covered living terrace (which had to be built around an existing tree). Before it stood an abstract sculpture of a female nude by Jacques Lipchitz. Le Corbusier's pronouncement in his book *Vers une Architecture* (1922) that "a house is a machine for living in" had made him the whipping boy of those who opposed



Fig. 4. Dining room of the Lalique pavilion at the 1925 Paris exposition.

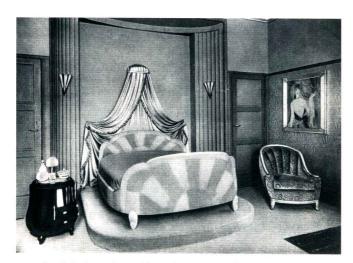


Fig. 5. Bedroom designed by André Groult. The furniture was enriched with sunburst patterns of sharkskin and ivory.

modernism, and when he requested space on which to erect his display, the organizers of the fair managed to find an obscure corner into which it might be tucked unobtrusively. The commissioners hid the building from view with a high fence during its construction, and it was not certain until the opening day that they would permit him to remove the hoarding.

Striking and ultimately significant as these modernist exhibits were, they were the exceptions. The overwhelming message of the Exposition des Art Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes was one of chic, elegance, and ostentation. Ironically, the balance might have shifted if Germany had been permitted to participate. Modern design had made much stronger inroads in Germany than in France. Walter Gropius's brilliant new building complex for the Bauhaus was completed in Dessau in 1925, as was Marcel Breuer's first tubular-steel furniture; had the Bauhaus

masters and students exhibited in Paris in 1925—as they finally managed to do in 1930—the course of French

decorative art might have been changed and the so-called Art Deco style, which lingered in France through the 1930s, been brought to a speedier end. This, however, was not to be. Anti-German sentiment was so strong in France in the aftermath of World War I that an invitation to Germany, though rancorously debated in the French press while the fair was being planned, was finally deemed to be impossible.

The exposition was a huge success. Attendance topped sixteen million. Hordes of American tourists traveled to Paris to see it, among them a number of the men and women who in the next decade would lead the American design movement. Although they went to marvel, however, few of the American visitors seem to have returned home persuaded that what they saw on display had much relevance to them. Helen Appleton Read, one of the more perceptive American critics, warned her readers:

The exotic and the ultra are perhaps overstressed in the furniture and displays of interior decoration. It must be remembered, however, that this is an exposition and a French one at that, and that it is only natural for the Frenchman with his love



Fig. 6. Konstantine Melnikov's Russian pavilion at the 1925 Paris exposition.