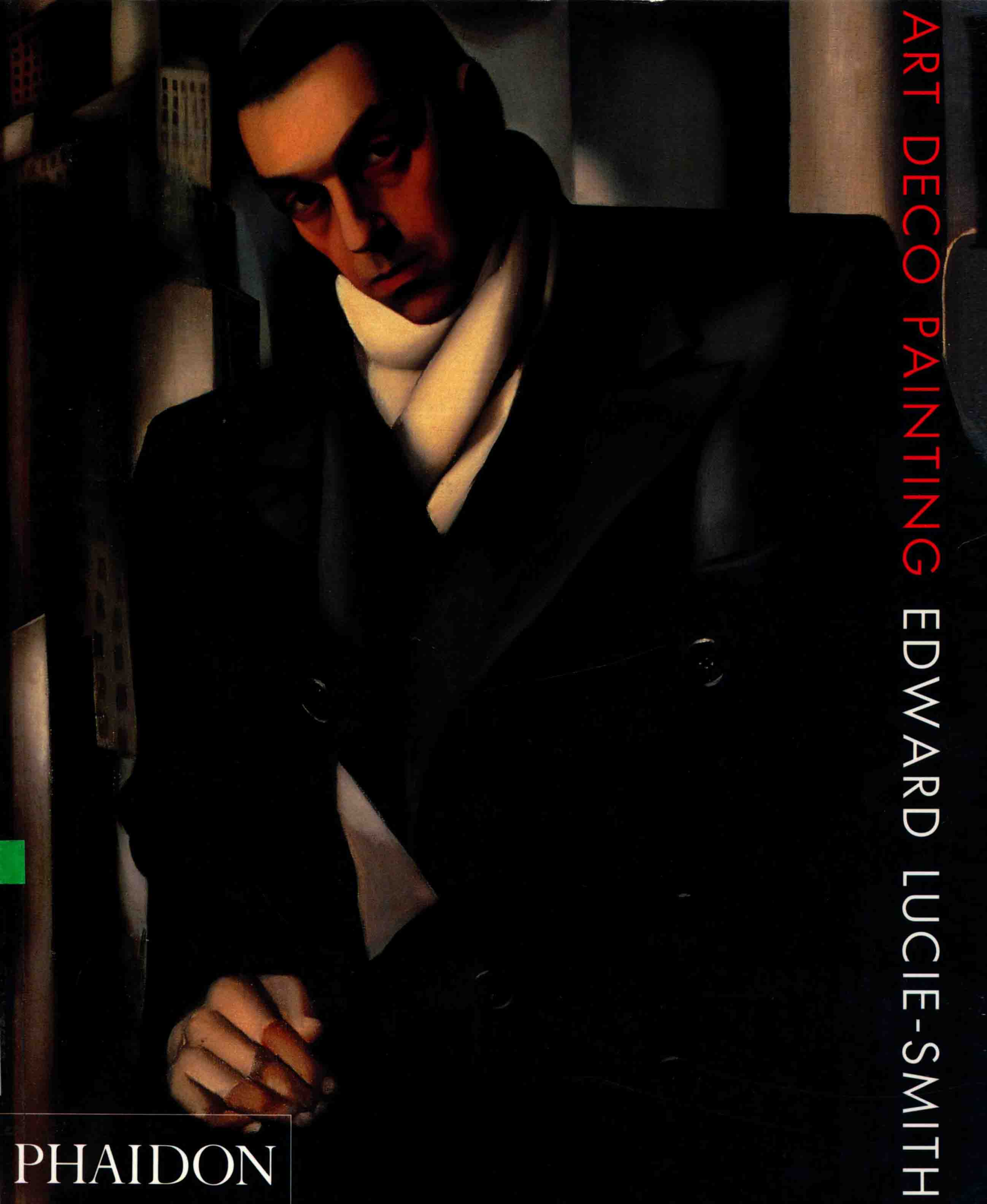

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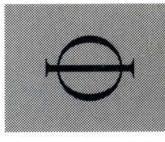

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TAMARA DE LEMPICKA
Unfinished Portrait of Tadeusz de Lempicki, detail (Plate 38)

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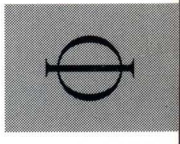

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1 JEAN DUPAS. *The Parakeets*. *c*. 1925. Private Collection. (Courtesy Barry Friedman)

1 INTRODUCTION: THE SOURCES OF ART DECO PAINTING

To many people, the idea of Art Deco painting will appear almost a contradiction in terms. The numerous books on the Art Deco style, published since it returned to fashion towards the end of the 1960s, give little information about painting. Their focus of interest is the applied arts – furniture, ceramics, metalwork, lacquer and so forth. Many of the room settings illustrated in these books – either genuine period pieces or recreations – contain only a few framed pictures. Exceptions are the interiors of Jacques Doucet's spectacular apartment in Neuilly which were shown in *L'Illustration* in May 1930. However, Doucet's often thickly crowded paintings tend to be earlier in date than the furniture which he commissioned from Pierre Legrain and other leading designers of the time. In his sitting room, for example, the huge sofa by Marcel Coard had the Douanier Rousseau's *La Charmeuse de Serpents* hanging above it. This had been painted nearly a quarter of a century before, in 1907.

Yet the Art Deco style did extend its influence into fields which were allied to painting. It had a tremendous impact on poster design, and the posters designed by artists such as Cassandre are now considered to be summits of this particular art form, fully equal to the posters created by Toulouse-Lautrec during the *belle époque*. Art Deco was also important for book and fashion illustration. The drawings and prints of illustrators such as Georges Barbier and Georges Lepape are rightly admired today. It is unlikely that Art Deco would have no impact on painting, given its international success and its power of penetration into all fields of design, and indeed, a number of leading Art Deco illustrators, such as Bernard Boutet de Monvel (1884–1949), had successful parallel careers as easel-painters. Boutet de Monvel was a regular exhibitor in the Paris Salons of the interwar period, showing landscapes, portraits and nudes. Similarly, artists now best remembered as painters, such as Marie Laurencin (1883–1956) and Tsuguharu Foujita (1886–1968), were in regular demand as poster designers.

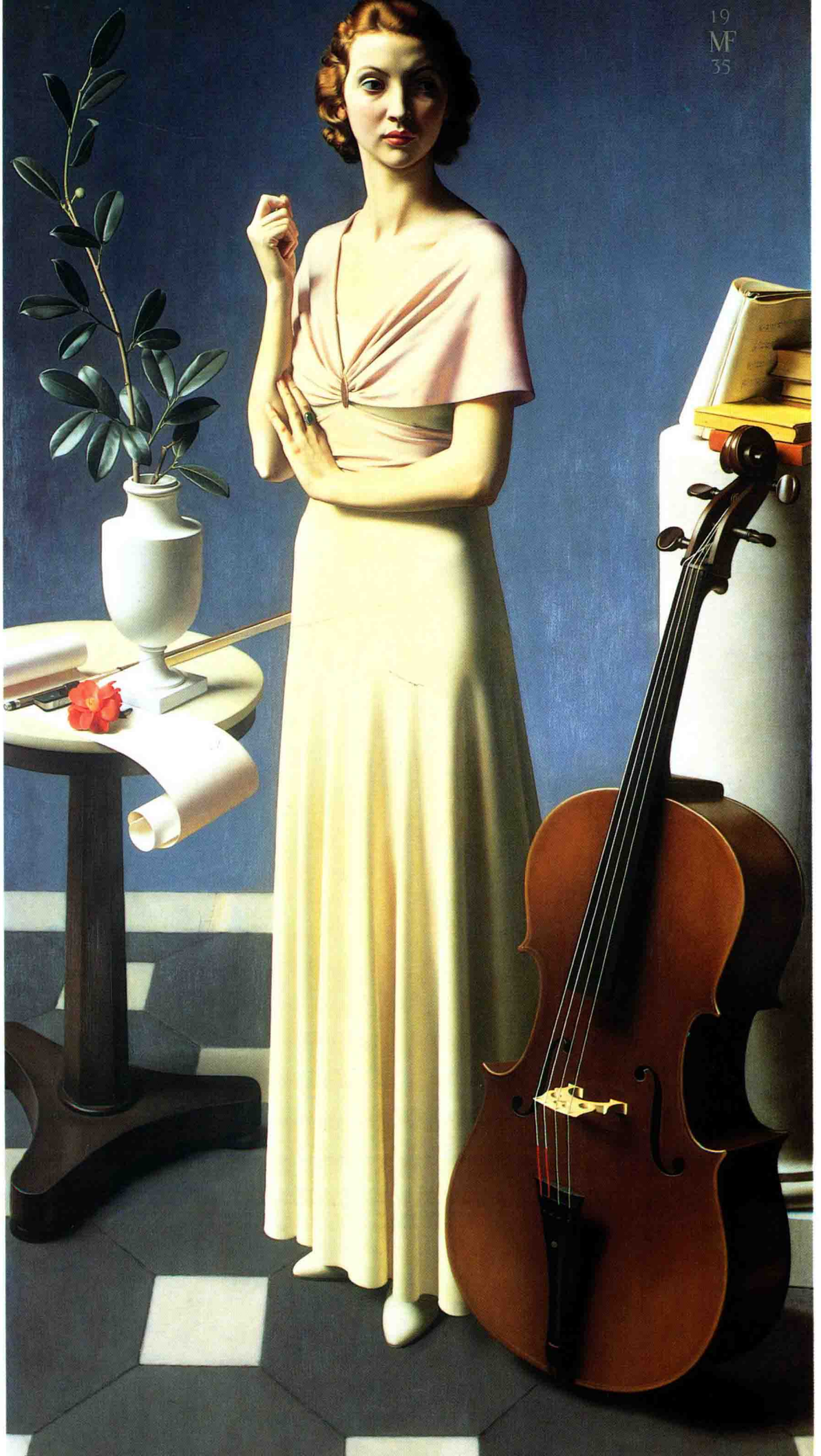
Any definition of Art Deco painting has to take four factors into account: style; subject-matter; the relationship between this kind of art and the general development of the Modern Movement; and the uses to which paintings were put during the interwar period – in other words, their social function. Not unexpectedly, the first two categories are dependent on the third and fourth. By analogy with Art Deco posters and through comparisons with other objects of the genre, Art Deco paintings might be expected to make much use of silhouette, to be sharp-edged and rather

restless, to favour flat bands and areas of colour rather than elaborate chiaroscuro, to be consciously refined and exquisite, and, where dealing with figures, to show them in rather mannered poses. By and large these expectations are fulfilled, though not to the same extent in every case.

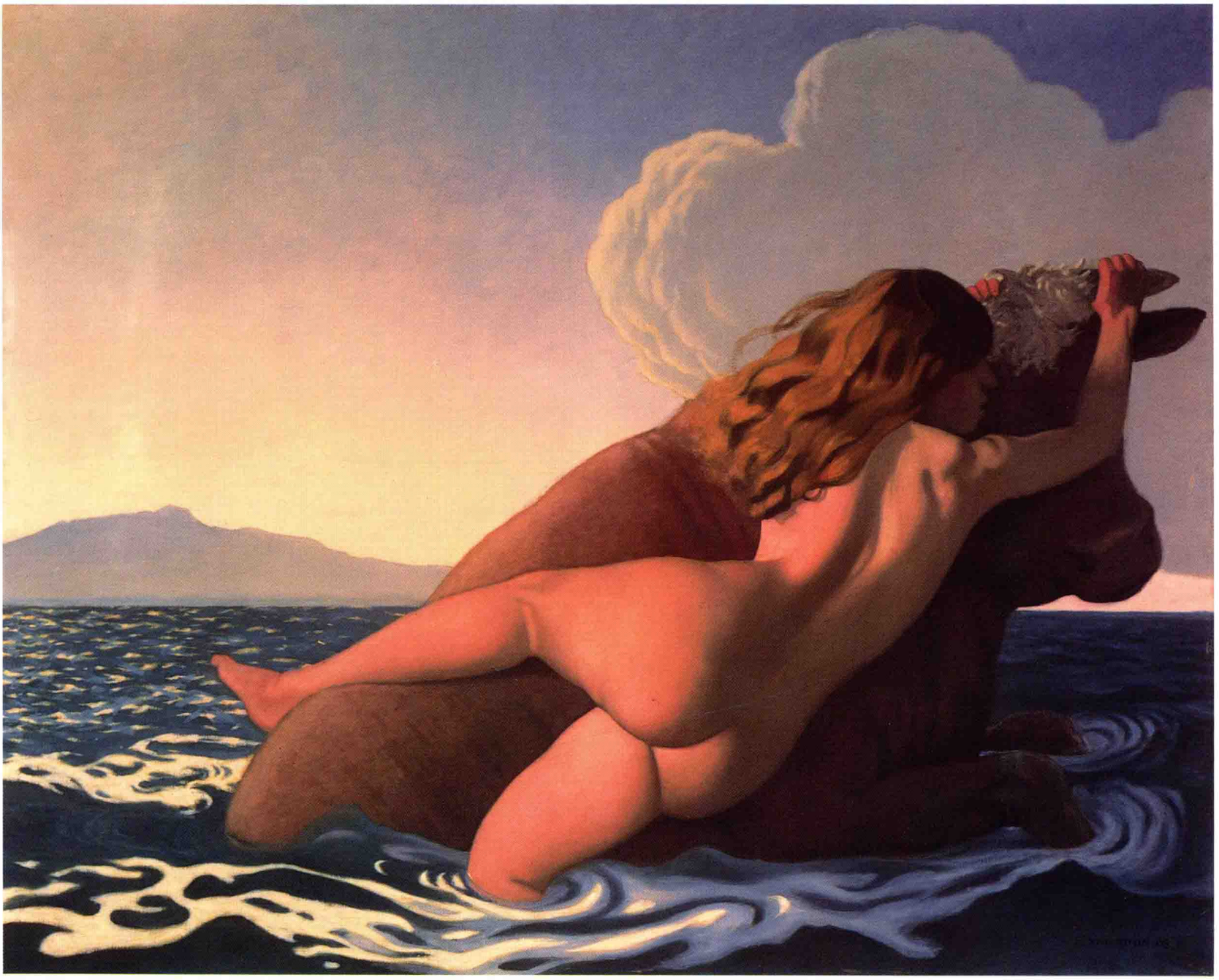
Art Deco paintings deal with a definable range of subject-matter: classical allegories, portraits, genre scenes, landscapes and still lifes. One of the immediately striking things about this repertoire of subjects is its traditional character. It clings to the framework set up in the Renaissance and refined and elaborated at the start of the seventeenth century. In fact, in terms of the subjects chosen, the Art Deco painters remained consistently faithful to long-established ideas. In this area, at least, they saw no need to innovate.

Some aspects of their style of painting may appear rather academic, particularly in the case of the classical allegories, which tackle the kind of subject-matter traditionally prescribed to students at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and at other official academies throughout Europe, as part of their professional training. But other aspects seem to be dependent on the non-academic art styles which flourished before the First World War. In particular, there are influences from Symbolist illustrators, such as Aubrey Beardsley, from the Nabis (particularly Maurice Denis and Paul Sérusier), from the Russian designers who dominated the first and greatest period of Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes (Leon Bakst and Alexandre Benois), from both Analytic and Synthetic Cubism (though with the latter predominant) and from Italian futurism. There also seem to be influences from contemporary styles, especially from the painters of the Novecento Group in Italy, whose way of painting often has a strong Art Deco flavour to it; and from the more conservative artists of the Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany. These German artists are sometimes grouped separately, and described as Magic Realists.

It is clear from this that any painting which is described as Art Deco is usually thoroughly eclectic: a stylistic amalgam which combines different and perhaps antagonistic tendencies. The explanation is simple. The public to which Art Deco painting addressed itself was the same as that served by the Art Deco designers of furniture and other artefacts. It consisted of two groups. There were the leisured and moneyed private patrons, the equivalent of preceding generations of private patrons who had sustained and guided the visual arts throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet there were also important differences as wealthy buyers of art now came from a less cultivated background and were often in possession of new fortunes rather than old money. Equally, they were often rootless cosmopolitans, cast adrift by the war. On the one hand, they were obsessed with fashion; on the other, they were imbued with a rather nervous conservatism. The result was a taste for the trappings of modernity, combined with a tendency to shy away from genuine radicalism. The second group possessed the power to give official commissions but its expectations were to a large extent still conditioned by the official art of the pre-war period. Yet at the same time there was also a feeling that official art should move with the times and absorb some, at least, of the lessons of Modernism.



2 MEREDITH FRAMPTON. *Portrait of a Young Woman*. 1935. The Tate Gallery, London



3 FÉLIX VALLOTTON. *The Rape of Europa*. 1908. Kunstmuseum, Berne

4 PABLO PICASSO. *Bathers, Biarritz*. 1918. Musée Picasso, Paris