The years between the two world wars witnessed great social, political, and cultural change in the United States. More than one million African Americans left the South in hopes of finding economic opportunities and racial equity in northern, midwestern, and western cities; most women won the right to vote through the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920; and many artists adopted modern streamlined styles developed in Europe using new production technologies and materials. Through the presentation of over 140 works of art made in this mode between 1918 and 1939, American Art Deco: Designing for the People offers an opportunity to be immersed within this dynamic period. Additionally, the broad array of decorative and fine art encourages us to consider the optimism and glamour of this moment in our nation’s history along with the devastation and discrimination that was also prevalent.

The exhibition opens with a selection of objects made during the 1920s in Paris—then considered the world’s most fashionable city—as a look centered on sleek lines, geometric forms, and luxurious materials was emerging. The style came to be known as Art Deco after the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts), in which participating European designers rejected historicism and promoted the innovative aesthetic. Numerous American artists and patrons saw this work either directly or through reproductions and sought to recreate it stateside. Although American Art Deco objects retain the emphasis on angularity and simplicity seen in those produced in France, they were generally made with less expensive materials and therefore available to a wider base of consumers. For example, the step-like sides and starburst motif found in Paul T. Frankl’s Modernique Clock (1928; fig. 1) evoke contemporary European design, but the
The optimism of the Jazz Age and so-called “Roaring Twenties” came to an abrupt end with the New York stock market crash of 1929. The negative ripple effects of its collapse were compounded by devastating erosion throughout parts of the Midwest in the early 1930s caused by drought and unsustainable farming practices. Paintings like Grant Wood’s *Stone City, Iowa* (1930) reflect an idyllic rural life that appealed to isolationist Depression-era audiences looking to the heartland for support. Recovery efforts began in 1933 with President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program, which included financial reforms and regulations as well as public works projects like infrastructure construction and art commissions. Photographs by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, both hired by the Farm Security Administration, document the continuing despair experienced by many people during this time.

As Americans recovered from the Depression, industries sold consumers a vision of the future full of gleaming household appliances like electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, mirrored radios, and sleek automobiles. Industrialization and technological advances in mass production made more goods accessible to a greater number of consumers, and labor-saving appliances also gave women more time to work outside the home or pursue leisure activities. *American Art Deco: Designing for the People* concludes with a section devoted to modern everyday living, featuring a selection of objects such as the Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner (designed 1937; fig. 3) that reflect the streamlined style of the machine age.
The Frist Art Museum is presenting this exhibition during the twentieth anniversary of our opening as a way to celebrate our own Art Deco building. Architecture is one of the most common idioms in which we see the style used in America, as is evident in buildings like the Chrysler Building in New York, the Delano Hotel in Miami, and Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles. The Frist’s building—formerly Nashville’s postal headquarters—was built in 1933–34 by local firm Marr & Holman and financed by the US Treasury Department’s Office of Construction. The lobby (fig. 4) contains colored marble and other stone geometric forms on the floor and walls, as well as cast-aluminum doors and grillwork featuring symbols of local industry. This environment provides a complimentary context for the myriad objects on view in our galleries—objects that together reflect this complex age of American zeal and loss.

Katie Delmez
Senior curator

Illustrations


Fig. 2: Aaron Douglas (American, 1899–1979). Noah’s Ark, 1935. Oil on Masonite, 48 x 36 in. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee. © 2021 Heirs of Aaron Douglas / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo: Jerry Atnip


Fig. 4: Grand Lobby. Frist Art Museum. Photo: Robt Ames Cook
Organized by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, and Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska

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