



# AMERICAN ART DECO DESIGNING FOR THE PEOPLE, 1918–1939

Ingram Gallery  
October 8, 2021—January 2, 2022

COVER: John Henry Bradley Storrs (American, 1885–1956). *Ceres*, ca. 1928. Nickel-plated cast terra-cotta, 20 1/4 x 4 3/4 x 3 7/8 in. Wichita Art Museum, Museum purchase, Friends of the Wichita Art Museum, 1987.7.  
© Estate of John Storrs

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



Figure 1



Figure 2

timepiece is made from chrome and Bakelite—a novel form of plastic—rather than more extravagant silver and ivory. Sculptors, painters, and printmakers also embraced these formal elements, as seen through works by Paul Manship, Raymond Jonson, and Rockwell Kent.

World War I was a turning point for multiple historically marginalized groups in American society. For the first time on a large scale, middle-class women worked outside the home, both in direct support of the war effort or in jobs now vacant because men were overseas. When the soldiers returned to the US—and their jobs—many women did not want to relinquish the freedoms

they had briefly experienced. In addition to pushing for political power through the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, women sought less restrictive personal attire, such as the more loosely draped flapper dress and the shorter, less high-maintenance bob hairstyle. Many African Americans also enjoyed more self-determination during the war, at home and abroad. That autonomy, coupled with a growing concentration of Black people in northern cities like New York and Chicago because of the Great Migration and more access to higher education through historically Black colleges and universities, fostered a flowering of African American literature, music, theater, and visual art. Aaron Douglas was one of the most important artists of this movement, now called the *Harlem Renaissance*. Douglas first came to Nashville from New York in 1930 to create a series of murals in his signature style of silhouetted figures and radiating bands of color for Fisk University. Ten years later, he established the art department at Fisk, where he taught for the next twenty-six years. This exhibition features several important works by Douglas (fig. 2), photographer James Van Der Zee, and other notable figures associated with the Harlem Renaissance.



Figure 3

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.





Figure 4

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. 1: Paul T. Frankl, designer (American, born Austria, 1887–1958); Warren Telechron Company, manufacturer (Ashland, Massachusetts, 1926–1992). *Modernique Clock*, 1928. Chromium-plated and enameled metal, molded Bakelite, and brush-burnished silver, 7 3/4 x 6 x 3 1/2 in. Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver, Gift of Michael Merson, 2010.0670. Image courtesy of Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver. Photo: Wes Magyar

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. 3: Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild, designer (American, 1898–1985); Electrolux Corporation, manufacturer (Dover, Delaware, founded 1919). *Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner (Model 30)*, designed 1937. Chrome-plated steel, aluminum, vinyl, and rubber, 8 1/2 x 23 x 7 3/4 in. Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver, 2004.3466. Image courtesy of Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver. Photo: Wes Magyar

Fig. 4: Grand Lobby. Frist Art Museum. Photo: Robt Ames Cook

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