October 8, 2021–January 2, 2022

For many, the words Art Deco conjure images of soaring skyscrapers, sleek automobiles, and luxurious household items. Geometric forms and streamlined ornamentation characterize this international style, which emerged in France after World War I and quickly manifested stateside in a broad array of decorative and fine arts. This exhibition examines how Art Deco was adapted during a pivotal moment in American history, encouraging us to consider the optimism and glamour of the Roaring Twenties, along with the environmental and economic devastation of the 1930s.

The period between the world wars was a time of great social, political, and cultural change in America. Hundreds of thousands of African American families left the South for economic opportunities and hopes of racial equity in northern and western cities; most women won the right to vote through the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920; and innovations in materials and production made new artistic designs widely available, thereby allowing more people to furnish their homes with the latest goods. At the same time, African Americans, Indigenous people, women, and immigrants faced discrimination across the country.

One hundred years later, the changes and challenges of the interwar years can shed light on our contemporary world. Like today, there were great disparities in wealth and opportunity, as well as systemic oppression at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. People were learning how to navigate life again after a devastating
pandemic. Also like today, many Americans hoped for a more equitable future when all would flourish and their voices would be heard—a hope expressed in many of the works on view.

From Paris to America

The ambitious 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) was a potent sign that Europe was recovering from the economic, physical, and social devastation of World War I. Held in Paris—considered the world’s most fashionable city at the time—the exposition and the participating designers rejected historical styles and promoted modern architecture, interior design, and household goods with simplified lines and geometric forms, often made using precious materials. Design critics derived the name for this new style from the title of the exposition, dubbing it Art Deco.

Although American designers did not exhibit their work in the Paris Exhibition, wealthy patrons and representatives of manufacturers traveled from the United States to see the latest fashions, and many bought beautiful and expensive souvenirs. Americans who stayed home could read about the objects on display in magazine and newspaper articles. Some businesses in the United States imported French Art Deco objects similar to the examples seen here.

Featured Object

Vase, ca. 1920–25
Designed by René Lalique (French, 1860–1945)
Glass
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Gift of Mrs. Oliver C. Mosman, 65–33

Principally inspired by nature, René Lalique frequently incorporated plants and animals into his glassware. This molded, nearly opaque glass vase has four sections of identical design. In each, a background of flowers and fruit-bearing trees, possibly including a pineapple, is framed by alligators inside vertical curves.

Throughout the 1920s, Lalique pioneered industrial techniques that allowed for the production and distribution of glass ornamental objects to a broader range of
consumers. This vase was created using a positive wax model with a hollow interior. After blowing or casting hot glass into the model, the wax was carefully chipped away, resulting in a unique object.

**American Art Deco**

New materials and technologies were key to the development of Art Deco in the United States. In American-made products, the luxurious materials used by European manufacturers were often replaced with industrially produced alternatives. Recently invented plastics replaced ivory. Aluminum, steel, and chrome dazzled like silver. Inexpensive woods, such as maple and walnut, were stained to look like mahogany and ebony. As a result, more Americans could afford the new style and update their homes while supporting postwar commerce.

Many designers in the United States favored a modern outlook that embraced industrial and technological progress. They employed abstract designs and stylized forms to symbolize a dynamic future. This attitude was reflected in everything from skyscrapers and automobiles to clothing and radios. Inspired by contemporary European artistic movements, painters and printmakers also adopted these formal elements, as seen through works in this section by Paul Manship, Raymond Jonson, and Rockwell Kent.

**Featured Objects**

**Modernique Clock, 1928**
Designed by Paul T. Frankl (American, born Austria, 1887–1958)  
Manufactured by Warren Telechron Company (Ashland, Massachusetts, 1926–1992)  
Chromium-plated and enameled metal, molded Bakelite, and brush-burnished silver  
Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver, Gift of Michael Merson, 2010.0670

Paul T. Frankl’s 1928 clock design for the Warren Telechron Company—marketed as the Modernique—coincided with American consumers’ growing interest in modern design. The Modernique’s metal case, with its step-like sides, starburst motif, and machine-age numbers, mimics the form and ornamentation of a 1920s skyscraper. For Frankl, the skyscraper constituted an ideal of beauty, representing the aspirations of the prevailing American spirit soaring upward.
**Danaë, 1920**  
Paul Manship (American, 1885–1966)  
Bronze  
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, Gift of Mrs. Arthur O’Brien, 1947.295

With its idealized musculature, languid pose, and simplified form, this sculpture of the mythological figure Danaë exhibits a melding of ancient and modern sensibilities. Paul Manship became captivated by excavations of ancient artifacts when studying in Rome, and he embraced the subjects of classical Greek and Roman art in his own work. While he never fully abandoned a realistic depiction of the human figure, his decorative and stylized interpretations appealed to a contemporary audience, earning him commissions for public monuments in such noted locations as Rockefeller Center in New York and a reputation as the foremost exponent of Art Deco sculpture in America.

**An Architectural Era**

Following World War I, industrial cities like Chicago and New York boomed. New skyscrapers marked the peak of the Art Deco style in the United States, becoming some of the tallest and most recognizable buildings in the world. Wealth from such commercial enterprises as petroleum drilling, organic chemistry, and railroads allowed business executives to commission towering buildings made of steel and concrete. The exteriors were decorated with allusions to specific industries—lightning bolts for electricity, tires for automobiles, gas wells for petroleum. Lobbies were lavishly lined with imported marbles, silver and gold lighting fixtures, and dark mahogany furniture. Everything proclaimed power and success. Federal buildings were often constructed in the Art Deco style as well, and the Frist Art Museum, housed in Nashville's former postal headquarters, exemplifies the aesthetic in the Grand Lobby.

To allow light and air to reach street level, civic leaders mandated the use of setbacks, or steplike tiers, at the top of skyscrapers. Architects soon adopted this form as a symbol of modernity and often topped skyscraper setbacks with spires and towers that recalled famous European churches. They were building cathedrals to commerce.
Featured Object

**Ceres**, ca. 1928
John Henry Bradley Storrs (American, 1885–1956)
Nickel-plated cast terra-cotta

A larger version of this sculpture of Ceres, the Roman goddess of grain, crowns the Chicago Board of Trade Building, a center for agricultural commerce. She holds a sheaf of wheat in one hand and a grain sample bag in the other. John Henry Bradley Storrs designed this figure’s streamlined form, which is rendered in modern materials, to complement the building’s Art Deco architecture. Greco-Roman figures often adorned skyscrapers to signify the type of business housed within.

Art and Design

American designers historically have looked to European architecture, interiors, and goods for direction. Although not considered Art Deco, the most persuasive influence on American design after World War I—especially for products marketed to the middle class—was the Staatliches Bauhaus, a German art school. Founded in Weimar, Germany, in 1919, the Bauhaus (as it is commonly called) sought to unite art and craft in order to design simple, functional, and well-made objects. The Bauhaus advocated for the use of industrial processes and materials such as tubular steel, plastics, and molded glass in the fabrication of works. Many designers who trained at the Bauhaus or subscribed to its design philosophy immigrated to the United States when the anti-Semitic and anti-progressive Nazi regime forced the school to close in 1933.

This was also the era of industrial designers—men and women who worked for a variety of manufacturers designing a range of household goods, from furniture to appliances. Some designers, such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, achieved celebrity status, creating demand for products in their distinctive styles.
Featured Object

Armchair: Model MR20, designed 1927; manufactured 1931
Designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (German, 1886–1969)
Manufactured by Bamberg Metallwerkstätten (Berlin, Germany, 1931–1932)
Nickel-plated steel, steel, and cane
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Purchase: acquired through exchange of the bequest of John K. Havemeyer, F89-32

The German architect and designer Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed this chair to emphasize function over ornamentation. The tubular steel frame is both lightweight and durable. Mies was the last director of the Bauhaus, an influential German design school that employed innovative materials to create mass-produced, affordable furniture. American designers working in the Art Deco style also drew inspiration from Bauhaus principles to develop the streamlined, machine-inspired furniture and household goods of the 1930s.

Americans on the Move

Although railroad systems connected the United States by 1869, the country’s infrastructure of paved roads was largely developed in the 1910s and 1920s. Henry Ford’s Model T, introduced in 1908, was the first automobile readily available to middle-class Americans. In 1927, Ford unveiled the Model A, a sleek, modern machine with faster speeds and better gas mileage. The United States had entered the era of the automobile.

While white Americans traveled on expanded highways, interstate movement for people of color was not always an expression of freedom. As the federal government forcibly removed Indigenous people from their ancestral lands, the mining, farming, and oil industries desecrated the nation’s ecology. Fleeing persecution in the American South and seeking more job opportunities, many Black Americans moved north in a mass exodus known as the Great Migration.
Featured Object

Model A Automobile, 1930
Manufactured by Ford Motor Company (Detroit, Michigan, founded 1903)
The Dishner Family Collection

Henry Ford’s vision of giving the common American access to an automobile profoundly impacted the day-to-day lives of millions of citizens. A decade after the company’s incorporation in 1903, Ford Motors opened the United States’ first moving automobile assembly line in Highland Park, Michigan. The relatively high wages offered to Ford employees, as well as the low cost of the final product, enhanced the position of both worker and consumer. Made between 1927 and 1931, the sinuous curve of the Model A’s fenders and geometric shape of its chrome radiator also reflect the then-popular Art Deco style.

Status and Design: Hood Ornaments

Renowned designers and manufacturers produced these hand-cast and intricately detailed accessories to adorn automobiles. Hood ornaments often thematically evoked speed and modern technological progress through motifs like airplanes or leaping horses. The French designer René Lalique crafted pressed-glass mascots after falcons and dragonflies to embellish luxury cars. In 1926, General Motors introduced a line of cars produced in Pontiac, Michigan, and manufactured a series of hood ornaments referencing the Odawa chief Obwandiyag, called Pontiac by white colonizers. Although small in scale, hood ornaments were among the most striking examples of Art Deco design in the 1920s and 1930s.

The New Woman

World War I was a turning point for American society. Women went to work—not only in direct support of the war, but also to fill thousands of job vacancies and maintain industrial and agricultural production. For the first time, a substantial number of middle-class women worked outside the domestic sphere, assuming roles as doctors, factory workers, nurses, secretaries, and more.

When men returned home from the front, many women did not want to sacrifice their independence. Galvanized by a glimpse of equality, more women advocated for their
constitutional rights. On August 18, 1920, after the Tennessee legislature cast the last vote needed to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, the federal government prohibited states from denying citizens the right to vote on the basis of sex. African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American women, however, remained disenfranchised. The fight for full voting rights and equity continues today.

Women also battled traditional restrictions with trailblazing fashion. In the 1920s, young women across racial boundaries styled themselves as flappers. Dressing for freedom (and energetic dancing), they bobbed their hair, discarded their corsets, wore looser dresses with shorter hemlines, and painted their lips with bright colors.

**Featured Objects**

*I Want You for the Navy*, 1917  
Howard Chandler Christy (American, 1872–1952)  
Published by Forbes (Boston, Massachusetts)  
Lithograph  
The National WWI Museum and Memorial, 1920.1.103

This poster served as a recruitment call for the US Navy during the First World War. Howard Chandler Christy developed an iconic character, popularly known as the “Christy Girl,” who appeared in serialized stories and magazine advertisements. Conceived as the quintessential white, educated, middle-class American girl—a “soldier’s dream”—she was meant to embody youth, vitality, and grace. Here, she is deployed to encourage enlistment. Dressed in a Navy uniform and assuming a confident, feminine pose, she fulfills her patriotic duty, using her beauty and charm to recruit young men to the armed services.

*Dress*, 1920s  
Maker unknown  
Cotton with reproduction sash  
The Tennessee State Museum, 79.105.2

This summer dress is representative of the type of clothing worn by both suffragists and anti-suffragists during the special session of the Tennessee General Assembly called by Governor Albert Roberts to vote on ratifying the Nineteenth Amendment. The gold sash declares that the wearer was a suffragist; anti-suffragists wore red sashes. That summer, suffragists organized for the ratification effort and visited legislators in their
home communities throughout Tennessee. On June 28, 1920, suffrage leader Katherine Kenny wrote, “I spent my Sabbath getting out letters to our twenty district chairmen advising them of our status and instructing them in their district work. As many of our legislators live in remote villages, I’m sure the poll will not be complete before the last of the week.”

The Harlem Renaissance

During World War I, many African Americans enjoyed more self-determination at home and abroad. The war effort led to better jobs and, while the armed forces were still strictly segregated, Black soldiers experienced less discrimination in Europe. That autonomy, coupled with a growing concentration of Black people in northern cities because of the Great Migration and greater access to higher education through historically Black colleges and universities, fostered a flowering of African American literature, music, theater, and visual art. Originally called the New Negro Movement after Alain Locke's important 1925 anthology, the term *Harlem Renaissance* is now used to describe this interwar cultural effervescence, centered in that New York neighborhood, but present in many other cities around the country.

Aaron Douglas was one of the most important artists of 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. Photographer James Van Der Zee, whose many portraits of fashionable Harlem residents offer a thorough documentation of life in this important period, and painters Malvin Gray Johnson and James A. Porter were other notable figures associated with the movement.

Featured Objects

*Noah’s Ark*, 1935
Aaron Douglas (American, 1899–1979)
Oil on Masonite
Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee

In 1927, Aaron Douglas was invited by James Weldon Johnson to contribute illustrations to his book of sermonic poems, *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. Douglas revisited, enlarged, and revised those compositions throughout the
1930s. The resulting paintings, which are among the artist’s most accomplished works, evidence his interest in Art Deco design, Egyptian relief carving, and European cubism. *Noah’s Ark* features Douglas’s distinctive silhouette style, with flat forms and clear contours defined by monochromatic passages of restrained, muted color. The profile of an African man commands the foreground, while the ark thrusts forward behind him. Animals flee into the vessel as jagged bolts of lightning strike.

**FIRE!! A Quarterly Devoted to Younger Negro Artists Cover, 1926**
Aaron Douglas (American, 1899–1979)
Offset print
Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee

Kansas-born Aaron Douglas came to New York in 1925 at the outset of the Harlem Renaissance. Influenced by African masks, Art Deco design, and European abstraction, Douglas’s innovative imagery was featured in paintings, murals, books, and magazines. His cover for the literary magazine *FIRE!!* graphically expresses his belief that human achievement began in ancient Egypt and that African Americans are heirs to that legacy. Filled with essays, poems, and illustrations, *FIRE!!* conveyed the changing attitudes of younger Black Americans, exploring issues such as interracial relationships, sexuality, and colorism.

**The Jazz Age—A Culture of Change**

Sidecars, bee’s knees, Count Basie, the jitterbug, the Charleston—all evoke the swinging 1920s and 1930s in America. Art Deco objects and interiors with polished, mirrored, and gilded surfaces projected glamour and prosperity, even during a time of great contradictions. From 1919 to 1930, Prohibition declared that “intoxicating liquors” were illegal. Drinking alcohol went underground and behind closed doors, becoming even more fashionable.

Clubs sprang up. Dance halls, cabarets, and vaudeville acts blossomed. Jazz and the blues, both of which had originated in the African American South, attracted diverse audiences. Jazz could be thunderous and quiet, dark and often hopeful.

Although there was some social mingling of Black and white Americans, it was still a period of great segregation and inequity. In many cities, Black bandleaders could play for white people but not stay in the same hotels as their audience. Drag shows allowed for nontraditional articulations of gender within the confines of cabarets. Meanwhile,
queer expression, breaches of segregation, and other violations of convention were still widely rejected across America.

**Featured Objects**

**Silver-and-White Beaded Chiffon Dress, 1925–27**
Sold by Rubins (Kansas City, Missouri)
Silk, white and pearl beads, and silver embroidery
Courtesy of the Kansas City Museum, Kansas City, Missouri, 1949.103

As the popularity of jazz music and clubs soared, women’s dresses were designed to allow freedom of movement. Waistlines dropped and dresses became more loosely fitted so that women could perform the lively and liberated popular dances of the period, such as the Charleston.

**Portrait of Cab Calloway, 1933**
Carl Van Vechten (American, 1880–1964)
Gelatin silver print
John Hope and Aurelia E. Franklin Library, Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee

Cab Calloway was a singer, dancer, and bandleader associated with the Cotton Club in Harlem, where his performances combined jazz with vaudeville. This portrait by Carl Van Vechten reflects Calloway’s exuberant stage persona.

Calloway was among the many distinguished sitters who posed for Van Vechten, an at-times controversial novelist, arts promoter, critic, and avid portrait photographer. His subjects included activists, actors, artists, dancers, journalists, singers, and writers. Van Vechten’s pictures, which number in the tens of thousands, provide a rich archive of the Harlem Renaissance.

**Prohibition and Cocktail Culture**

Though it was illegal to manufacture, sell, and transport “intoxicating” beverages during Prohibition, drinking did not stop. Instead, alcohol consumption moved underground and out of sight in bars or clubs called speakeasies. By 1925, speakeasy clubs were operating in every major American city, and bootlegging operations sprang up around the country. Manufacturers continued producing barware so consumers could drink in style.
Economic Depression and Stimulus

Americans suffered great economic hardships following the stock market crash of 1929, which halted industry and the growth of wealth. The dust bowl of 1930–36 added to the misery, especially in the Midwest. Destructive agricultural practices, compounded by massive drought, destroyed the ecology of the American prairies, and food was scarce.

Recovery began in 1933, facilitated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, which included a series of federal programs, financial reforms, and regulations. Public works projects constructed bridges, roads, and civic buildings. The government employed artists to document American life and decorate public spaces. Cities and businesses staged world’s fairs to encourage consumers to purchase new objects, putting designers and factory laborers back to work.

To escape the realities of the world, many people turned to movies, radio programs, and musical recordings. By the 1930s, films had sound, and comedies, westerns, and musicals were produced in great numbers. Radio broadcasts included everything from religious sermons to soap operas, to quiz shows. Big bands with bandleaders like Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway provided music for dances that went on for hours. Paradoxically, the arts flourished during this time of crisis.

Featured Object

*Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936, printed 1965
Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965)
Gelatin silver print
Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-1061.1965

No other image from the 1930s evokes the human toll of the Great Depression as poignantly as *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. Already a professional portrait photographer in the early 1920s, Dorothea Lange was motivated by the social and economic devastation of the Depression and the dust bowl to leave her studio. She was working for the Farm Security Administration in 1936 when she recorded this migrant pea picker, Florence Thompson, with three of her children. The photograph was widely circulated in magazines and newspapers and became a symbol of the plight of migrant farm workers during the Great Depression.
Depression Glass

*Depression glass* is machine-made glassware produced from the late 1920s through about 1940. The moderately priced, mold-made glass was marketed to middle-class housewives in a wide variety of patterns and colors, offering a bit of brightness and hope for the dining table during the Great Depression. Some manufacturers included a small piece of glassware in boxes of food or cleansers, enticing consumers to purchase more pieces for their table service. Local movie theaters even gave away pieces of glass with the purchase of a ticket. Entire sets could be assembled in this manner.

Featured Object

**PYRAMID (No. 610) Relish Dish,** 1926–32  
Manufactured by Indiana Glass Company (Dunkirk, Indiana, founded 1907)  
Glass  
Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver, 2011.6458

Modern Living

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. New fashions, produced by large clothing factories, provided the latest styles to more people, allowing freedom of personal expression. Print and radio advertisements touted “the new” to ensure that “the old” became obsolete and unfashionable. The United States seemed to be speeding into a bright future full of progress.

The influx of scientists, designers, artists, and writers from Europe helped to spur economic recovery in the United States, yet many of these innovators were fleeing persecution and intolerance in their homelands. Unresolved racial and economic inequities in America, including segregation in the South and redlining banking practices throughout much of the country, were also becoming even more exposed and stark. The country’s optimistic outlook was about to be challenged again: a global war and internal conflicts were on the horizon.
Featured Objects

Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner (Model 30), designed 1937
Designed by Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild (American, 1898–1985)
Manufactured by Electrolux Corporation (Dover, Delaware, founded 1919)
Chrome-plated steel, aluminum, vinyl, and rubber

Combining the runners of a sleigh, the silhouette of a rocket, and the front of a train, the chrome plating and dynamic lines of the Electrolux Model 30 gave the impression that cleaning would be a breeze. From 1937 to 1954, nearly a million vacuums were sold for $69.95 ($1,100.00 in today’s dollars). However, Electrolux offered a lucrative financing option: a $10.00 down payment could buy the Model 30 for $6.00 per month, with an overall $4.00 interest charge.

Sparton Bluebird Radio (Model 566), 1934
Designed by Walter Dorwin Teague (American, 1883–1960)
Manufactured by Sparks-Withington Company (Jackson, Michigan, founded 1900)
Ebony, crystal glass, and chrome
Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver, 2004.1850

The Sparton Bluebird Radio was one of four radio sets created by the noted industrial designer Walter Dorwin Teague for the Sparton 1936 line, which was introduced at the National Electrical and Radio Exposition of 1935. With its bold use of crystal glass, ebony, and chrome, the Bluebird became an icon of American Art Deco design. While this particular model was not affordable for the middle class, by 1930, nearly every American household had a radio. For the first time, urban and rural areas across the nation were connected through the shared experience of live news and entertainment broadcasts.

Streamline Moderne

During the 1930s, advances in electricity, petroleum refining, chemistry, and building materials encouraged new forms of communication and transportation. Engineers conceived sleeker, rounder, and more aerodynamic trains, planes, and automobiles, allowing for greater fuel efficiency. Designers also looked toward function and performance, removing excess ornamentation in favor of the streamlined aesthetic of the machine age. Architects applied these principles to buildings, especially
commercial structures like airport terminals, gas stations, motels, and movie theaters. Industrial designers added curved forms and polished surfaces to furniture and household appliances. This new version of the Art Deco style, called Streamline Moderne, was promoted at the Chicago World’s Fair of 1933.

**Featured Object**

**Coffee Samovar Set**, ca. 1938  
Designed by Walter von Nessen (American, born Germany, 1889–1943)  
Manufactured by Chase Brass and Copper Company, Chase Specialties Division (Waterbury, Connecticut, and New York, New York, 1930–1942)  
Chrome-plated metal with Bakelite accents  

Walter von Nessen’s designs employed industrial technologies and new materials such as chrome-plated metal, used here to mimic the sheen of silver typically found in fine European coffee sets. The samovar’s unadorned, gleaming surface and fluted cylindrical base exemplify the streamlined aesthetic that characterized American Art Deco in the 1930s. This set was produced by the Chase Brass and Copper Company, a firm that specialized in manufacturing bold Art Deco pieces for middle-class consumers.
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