

SENSUOUS STEEL  
ART DECO  
AUTOMOBILES





## **MASTERPIECES OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY DESIGN,**

the automobiles and motorcycles in this exhibition are stunning in their beauty, luxuriousness, and evocation of an era fueled by an optimistic view of modernity and a desire to convey social status through conspicuous consumption. The vehicles exemplify the style known today as Art Deco, which originated in France in the early twentieth century, and through the 1920s and 1930s exerted a strong international influence on the design of buildings, furniture, jewelry, objets d'art, and fashion, as well as luxury ocean liners, passenger trains, and automobiles.

The Art Deco “look” was inspired by a range of artistic sources. These include ancient Egyptian art, in which gracefulness, simplicity, and symmetry were felt by many to denote timeless ideals of beauty; the Arts and Crafts movement and the Vienna Secession, which employed elegant and often abstracted motifs in creating decorative arts and environments; Cubism, with its focus on spatial dynamism and allusions to “primitive” art; and Futurism, with its celebration of motion and machine-based forms. Art Deco design offered just the right balance between classical cohesion and machine age progressivism.

The automobiles and motorcycles in this exhibition link the style's evolution to changes in cultural aspirations and attitudes over two tumultuous decades. Early Art Deco vehicles reflect the opulence of the Roaring Twenties. They were made with fine materials and sported beautiful accessories, from elegant grillework to the miniature statuary of hood ornaments. During the 1930s, designers devised a language of streamlining, employing dramatic angles and sweeping curves to create sinuous profiles that became synonymous with aerodynamic efficiency, surging power, and industrial progress.

Tastes changed rapidly in twentieth-century art and design; what once signified modernity quickly became emblematic of a past era. Art Deco automobiles fell from favor during and after World War II, when new designs were frequently inspired by imagery associated with the atomic age. Yet today, historians of art, design, and architecture acknowledge the classic cars of the 1920s and 1930s as among the most visually exciting and refined designs of the twentieth century.





**DURING THE 1920S AND 1930S**, great examples of Art Deco architecture appeared in such cities as New York, Miami, Tulsa, even Nashville. This exhibition is presented in one of Nashville's most celebrated Art Deco buildings, which came into existence as the United States Main Post Office in 1934 and which was repurposed to open as the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in 2001. The design, in a style often referred to as stripped classicism, links the stability and symmetry of ancient architecture—through elegant proportions, marble veneer, and Greek-style fluted pilasters on the exterior—with the austere geometry that characterized much Modernist architecture of the period.

Designed by the firm of Marr & Holman, the Post Office was built during the Great Depression with the intention of communicating to Middle Tennesseans the stability and beneficence of the federal government. Design elements in its Grand Lobby include twelve Art Deco style aluminum icons that symbolize such forces of social cohesion and progress as commerce, transportation, technology, and education. Elsewhere, a stylized eagle on the Great Seal of the United States (the eagle is also the symbol of the Postal Service) and a bare-breasted female figure—an allegory for liberty and law—convey the role of classical allusion in Art Deco design. This contrasts with a Futurist-inspired geometric abstraction on the interior doors that expresses machine age ideals of dynamism and forward movement. Together, these architectural elements combine tradition and innovation, a fitting locale for an art center that presents the art of the world, past and present.



**JUNE 14-SEPTEMBER 15, 2013**

Ingram Gallery

**FRIST CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS**

This exhibition was organized by the Frist Center for the Visual Arts with Guest Curator Ken Gross.

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