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H-France Review Vol. 17 (January 2017), No. 11

Jared Goss, *French art deco*. New York and New Haven, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Distributed by Yale University Press, 2014, ix, 270 p. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781588395252 (Metropolitan Museum of Art), 9780300204308 (Yale University Press).

Review by Tim Benton, Open University, London.

The Met was an early purchaser of French *art déco* (short for *arts décoratifs*), beginning even before the American deputation visited the *Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris (1925). As Jared Goss explains, a generous gift by Edward C. Moore Junior enabled the Museum to continue purchasing Art Deco work into the 1960s. So the exhibition “Masterpieces of French Art Deco” was a welcome endeavour to put the collection on show. Many of the items were purchased or donated between 1922 and 1929, at which time the fashion for expensive French decorative arts was hit hard by the Wall Street crash.

The subsequent history of Art Deco underwent a transformation in which the French *déco* metamorphosed into a global phenomenon which reached from Rio de Janeiro to Bombay, touching even England, bastion of the Arts and Crafts and fiercely resistant to Art Nouveau. Thus *déco* and Deco are really quite different things: the first defined by its very high standards of craftsmanship and luxurious materials, the second opening itself to industrial production and the 1930s style known as Streamlining—a particularly American phenomenon (despite its European roots)—which morphed gradually into the high extravaganzas of industrial design of the 1950s. French *Art déco* suffered a rapid decline in popularity in the 1930s and it was not until the dealers (many of them American) began to interest themselves again in the 1960s that the real revival took place. It was also in 1967 that the far-sighted curator of the Department of Contemporary Art at the Met, Henry Geldzahler, began collecting Art Deco again. The two Parisian exhibitions at the Musée des arts décoratifs (1966 and 1976) put their fabulous collection on show for the first time.<sup>[1]</sup> Curiously, however, both catalogues played down the style as something belonging to the past and compared it unfavourably with the work of the Modernists. Works by Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus masters were included for balance. It was in England and America that an enthusiastic response took place. In Britain with Bevis Hillier’s little paperback book *Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s*, published in 1968<sup>[2]</sup> and in the States with an exhibition and catalogue Hillier helped curate in Minneapolis three years later.<sup>[3]</sup> Hillier’s taste was eclectic, embracing popular and industrial work as well as the French luxury trades and laying the foundations for a confusion about the origins and nature of the Art Deco movement.

I tried to grapple with the definition of Art Deco as a style in the catalogue of the major exhibition of global Art Deco at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2003<sup>[4]</sup> and again in an exhibition dedicated to French *Art déco* at the Fundacion Juan March in Madrid, in 2015.<sup>[5]</sup> In global terms, Art Deco cannot be called a style, but it has a recognizable feature, that can only be described as “promotional.” Absorbing an eclectic range of sources, from Art Nouveau, to Louis XIV, from African textiles to Japanese lacquer, the Art Deco designers absorbed and amplified them to give even greater impact. Beaux Arts classicism was the international style of the interwar period, and Art Deco softened its edges

and added exotic detail. I have described Art Deco as the modern but not Modernist response to the twentieth century. Following the example of the Viennese architect and critic Adolf Loos, who famously described ornament as crime,[6] Le Corbusier, trained as a decorator, wrote a book, just in time for the Paris 1925 exhibition, condemning the very principle of the decorative arts.[7] The Modernists stood against Art Deco from the start and contributed to its poor standing in the post-war period but a number of architects close to Modernism, such as Pierre Chareau and Rob Mallet-Stevens, deployed an Art Deco sensibility and ornament which set them apart, in Modernist eyes.

The case of the founding movement in France—the subject of this catalogue—is easier to classify. French *Art Déco* began as a conservative reaction to Art Nouveau around 1910 but quickly adopted a number of exotic and avant-garde references as inspiration. The main production of the Parisian furniture industries in the early twentieth century was in strict imitation of the styles of the past. Deborah Silverman explained that the main revival in French furniture was based on the Rococo style.[8] The dominant style of architecture and interior design in Paris was therefore a slightly simplified version of Louis XV or Louis XVI, which matches the style of apartments that were still being constructed in the historic French styles well into the 1930s.[9] At the same time, designers and architects were anxious to respond to the new artistic movements. Louis Süe, a protagonist of a return to a rational and classical approach to design after the excesses of Art Nouveau, was surprisingly open to the lessons of Cubism: “I find Cubism highly interesting ... if we understand [it] as a reaction against the debaucheries, the orgies of impressionist colours, as a method, a discipline, a return to construction, to geometry ... why not use what can serve us in it?”[10]

Süe’s ideas were given practical form by his collaborator, the fringe Cubist painter André Mare, in the striking so-called *Maison Cubiste* exhibited at the Paris Salon d’Automne in 1912. Here Mare, who was also active as a designer and, like Süe, promoted the modernization of tradition, drew together the work of several artists associated with Cubism. The exhibit comprised a sculptural plaster façade, designed by the sculptor Raymond Duchamp-Villon, an entrance hall, a “salon bourgeois” and bedroom. The interiors were furnished to designs by Mare (furniture and wallpaper), Roger de la Fresnaye (clocks and fireplaces), Marie Laurencin, Maurice Marinot (glassware), and Jacques Villon (ceramics), and hung with paintings by Albert Gleizes, de la Fresnaye, Laurencin, Fernand Léger, and Jean Metzinger. Mare’s stated agenda was “to make above all something very French, to remain within tradition” whilst at the same time returning “to lines that are simple, pure, logical and even slightly cold” and “to colours that are very fresh, very pure, very daring.”[11] After the war, Süe and Mare created a successful interior design firm—*la Compagnie des Arts français*—which set the tone for the style advocated by André Vera: rooted in tradition, dedicated to maintaining high standards of craftsmanship, and innovative in detail. Goss handles this material well, including a number of relevant quotations from André Vera, Léon Deshairs and others.

Another important source for *Art déco* was the *Wiener Sezession* and the work of the *Wiener Werkstätte* that evolved from it in 1903. Both Paul Poiret and Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, who separately visited Vienna in 1910, were influenced by the WW, and Rob Mallet-Stevens, who went on to become one of the leading French *Art déco* architects and designers, spent part of his youth in the *Palais Stoclet*, designed by the leader of the *Wiener Werkstätte*, Josef Hofmann, in Brussels and completed in 1911. The exquisite use of materials and stylised geometric and floral decoration had a marked effect in Paris. But *Art déco* also drank at the font of the exotic, from the exuberant *Ballets Russes* to the fashion for collecting African masks and tribal rugs. This is partly what made *Art déco* really unusual, and I think Goss plays down the role of the couturiers, whose extravagant tastes led to some of the most extraordinary commissions. Paul Poiret, Jeanne Lanvin, Jacques Doucet and Madame Mathieu Lévy commissioned the most famous *Art déco* interiors. Poiret’s *Martine* textiles, designed by young girls from the country, added an explosion of colour and fresh design to the market. Goss’s narrative correctly reflects the taste of the Met’s curators, who focussed on elegance and immaculate craftsmanship rather than the more outlandish expressions of Art Deco.

Most of the substantial literature on Art Deco was produced by dealers and connoisseurs eager to promote their favourite designers. The academic pickings are relatively rare. Goss's introduction is scholarly and generally fair. He documents the origins of the collection, follows the development of the style from its beginnings before the war until 1929 and traces the influence of the French decorative arts in the USA after 1925, when exhibitions in the major department stores put the style on show. The bulk of the beautifully illustrated book consists of a catalogue of the pieces supported by short biographies of the designers, arranged in alphabetical order. Although much of this information exists in other publications, it is well presented here, with some new material, and without the bias associated with much of the dealer literature.

## NOTES

[1] Musée des arts décoratifs (France), *Les années "25": art déco, Bauhaus, Stijl, esprit nouveau [Exposition] Musée des arts décoratifs, 3 mars-16 mai 1966* (Paris: 1966); Yvonne Brunhammer and Musée des arts décoratifs (Paris), *1925* (Paris: Presses de la Connaissance, 1976).

[2] Bevis Hillier, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s* (London: Studio Vista, 1968).

[3] Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Bevis Hillier, *The World of Art Deco. Text by Bevis Hillier. An exhibition organized by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, July-September 1971* (London: Studio Vista, 1971).

[4] Charlotte Benton, Tim Benton and Ghislaine Wood, *Art deco 1910-1939* (London: V&A Publications, 2003).

[5] Tim Benton, Manuel Fontán del Junco, and María Zozaya, eds., *Modern Taste: Art Deco in Paris, 1910-1935* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2015).

[6] The lecture, originally delivered in 1908 in Vienna was published in French in 1910. See Adolf Loos and Adolf Opel, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, Cal.: Ariadne Press, 1998).

[7] Le Corbusier, *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1926) and in an excellent translation by James Dunnett as Le Corbusier, *The Decorative Art of Today* (London: Architectural Press, 1987).

[8] Le Corbusier and Ozenfant ridiculed this trade in false antiques in the pages of *L'Esprit Nouveau* reproducing pages from the trade literature showing fake antiques "distressed" to look old (*L'Esprit Nouveau* 18, November 1923, np).

[9] Debora Silverman, *Art nouveau in fin-de-siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[10] Quoted by Suzanne Tise, from an article by Louis Vauxcelles, "Les idées du décorateur Louis Süe," published in *Excelsior*, 3 December 1918; see Suzanne Tise, *Between Art and Industry: Design Reform in France, 1851-1939* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 273.

[11] For readings of the Maison Cubiste see David Cottingham, "The maison cubiste and the meaning of modernism in pre-1914 France," in Eve Blau and Nancy J. Troy, *Architecture and Cubism* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); and Marie-Noëlle Pradel, "La maison cubiste en 1912," *L'Art de France* 1(1961), pp. 177-86.

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ISSN 1553-9172