



THE DARK SIDE OF
ART DECO

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2015

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How Art Deco could be considered as a propaganda movement?

INTRODUCTION

The Art Deco was a design movement that represented the development of science, technology and a luxury way of living, which propagated worldwide between the two world wars. It was popularised with the *Exposition des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* of Paris in 1925.

But behind this modern ideal we saw the development of a consumerist society as described by the New York Public Library, 2015 : "*Opulent consumption, crass commercialism, and the acceleration of contemporary life summed up in the Futurist credo "Speed is beauty."*

As we can imagine, the economic side was accompanied with a politic side as we will see in the second part of this essay with colonialism art deco architecture.

Finally we will ask ourselves if Art Deco has really a dark side or was just a mirror of our society.

1) A PROPAGANDA OF MASS CONSUMPTION?

THE BEGINNING

To understand how Art Deco could be considered as a propaganda weapon we have to go back to its origins.

The first World War postponed the Paris World Fairs to 1925 where the French government wanted to show the world that France is still leading the way of style, architecture and mode:

"The exhibition was shaped by France's ambitions in the years immediately after World War I (1914–18). Its aim was to establish the pre-eminence of French taste and luxury

goods. French displays dominated the exhibition and Paris itself was put on show as the most fashionable of cities." (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2003.)

This exhibition let the world discover that Art Deco symbolised both the scientific and technological progress that could lead to a better future although uncertain: *«Advances in numerous technologies led to both a depiction of a wonderful future world and apocalyptic visions of a world gone awry»* (Dooley, D. W. P7).

For instance one of the most acclaimed pavilion, *The Hôtel d'un Collectionneur*, became an Art Deco icon by using new technics and elegant decorations that was the characteristics of this movement:

" Its sumptuous decoration, rich use of colour and elegant modernisation of traditional forms and techniques have led many critics to consider the Grand Salon the greatest achievement of French Art Deco" (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2003.)

Even though the fair was a success, an important nation was missing, the United States:

"Herbert Hoover, then Secretary of Commerce, did not believe American designers could meet the entry requirement—producing truly new designs that did not borrow from ancient styles or were not imitations of previous works from other countries" (Dooley, D. W. P10)

This statement didn't prevent Americans designers to visit the fair and be motivated to adapt the Art Deco style to the American culture. In fact, Americans visitors thought that this exposition didn't show anything really new :

« American architects in particular felt little was "new" in terms of architectural design at the Paris Exposition, as stated previously by Raymond Hood. The architecture of Paris only helped convince American architects to embrace further the Art Deco style « » (" (Dooley, D. W. P12)

As we will see, this new motivation led to an important evolution of Art Deco.

DEPRESSION DECO

When the great depression hit America in the 1930s, we saw a new form of Art Deco appeared: the streamline.

With the rapid progress of aerodynamics and the development of the consumption society, streamline design was seen as the perfect solution because of its modern aesthetics with very few ornamentations.

The easiest definition can be found on Wikipedia: *" a concept first conceived by industrial designers who stripped Art Deco design of its ornament in favor of the aerodynamic pure-line concept of motion and speed developed from scientific thinking"*. A definition that can be completed by Dooley, D.W.: *"Streamlining changed*

2) POLITICS AND ART DECO

POLITICAL CONTEXT

As we saw the emergence of Art Deco linked with a consumerist society, we can say that art deco architecture represented a way for government to impose their agenda.

The political context of the art deco emergence was also the rise of nationalism in different part of the world as different politics and dictators used art deco to strengthen the feeling of nationalism:

" Similar to the Australian, Indian and South African situations, Art Deco in Brazil was deeply embedded in the search for a national identity. » (Cabalfin, E. R. G., 2003, p86)

"Art Deco was inextricably linked with the rise of nationalism in different countries." (Cabalfin, E. R. G., 2003, P88)

Some people risked themselves to link art deco and the Nazi's propaganda like Giles Worsley who can made architectural associations with Nazism architecture.

" What could be more in the spirit of Art Deco than Albert Speer's dramatic use of searchlights to create columns of light for grandly choreographed Nazi spectacles?" (Worsley, G., 2003. *Dark side of Art Deco.*)

To understand these comparisons we will focus on the Philippine exemple.

PHILIPPINE EXAMPLE

Art deco used to be also a weapon for coloniser as the Philippines's history showed us.

The American colonisation era took place between 1900 and the World War II . During this time the American government wanted to modernise the country by using its new advanced technology and building construction using in part the Art Deco style.

" the architectural, urban planning and transportation programs were geared towards making the city habitable according to American standards [...] represented the concretization and solidification of the intentions of the colonizers to project and create the image of a modern and progressive nation-state. " (Cabalfin, E. R. G., 2003, P100)

Indeed for the American government every country outside the western world is a country that needs to be civilised *" The avocates of American colonialism felt that it was their moral obligation to "set free" the colonized Filipino from ignorance and poverty by introducing'* (Cabalfin, E. R. G., 2003, P171).

This American vision of the world was strengthened by the success of American engineering with the building of the Panama Canal in the early 1900s. They considered themselves as modern in comparison of the Filipino that were compared to barbarian.

❖ SUBTLE POWER

Our first thought could be that build some building with art deco style is not an oppression, occupation or even less a “dark side”. But we have to understand that, if we keep the Philippines to illustrate our words, everything Americans did was to recreate a small United States in this country.

If we took the point of view of an autochthone, he saw everywhere around him new building with new technics, a new way of life, a new culture. He can embrace it or hate it but in any case he didn't had a choice, he had to live with it. As the philosopher Michel Foucault said: *Foucault reiterates the idea that this form of power becomes part of the everyday as the individual is continually made aware of his/her own identity, manipulated to accept a form of identity, or even imposed upon by a certain form of “truth”* (Cabalfin, E. R. G., 2003, p175)

This means that Art Deco was used as a weapon to Americanise Philippine.

3) ART DECO AND WHAT IT INSPIRED

IT'S NOT WHITE OR DARK

After these two parts we could said that Art Deco was very subversive and insidious, but there is also a bright side in the Art Deco movement.

As said in the first part of this essay, in the 1930s, we saw great technology being developed. The New-York world fair was called “*Dawn of a New Day*” and exposed different innovations in transportation, communication, food etc... We could say it was the apogee of the Art Deco.

Before, during the economic boom of the 1920s, the construction of skyscraper with the art deco style like the Chrysler building symbolised the progress and modernity

Optimism was matched only by the height of these structures, and fostered the belief in the “wonder city,” as exhibited by New York City during the Art Deco era (Dooley, D. W., 1999, p18)

By linking art deco to modern products and technology, everyone assimilate the fact that art deco was modern and bring a brighter future.

NEW YORK FAIR & CHICAGO FAIR IMPACTS

The Chicago world fair "The century of progress" and six years' later the New York fair showed to the world that America was the centre of design and technology

American architectural influence continued into the 1930s [...] achieving ultimate pre-eminence with the Chicago World's Fair of 1933. (Dooley, D. W., 1999, p27)

Art Deco mixed with new product was so in advanced that the visitors of the New York fair needed to be taught how to use the product when they will be released few months later:

"they were also intended to educate and inform the populace about basic materials and processes that were then very new and not well known. (Wikipédia, 2015)

Art Deco was very popular around the world, in particular in the USA where the daily life was invaded with art deco architecture and consumers products.

HOPES

We saw that some government used Art Deco to dominate their population but others were more ambiguous.

If we look again at the Philippines example, the government's planned urban policy was also a progress in infrastructure: *the development of Philippine infrastructure during the first half of the 20th century is directly connected to its inundation by new technologies and ideas from the United States.* (Cabalfin, E. R. G , p101)

A question come, is this progress not what people wanted? The answer seems to be yes for the improvement of the quality of life...for the people who can afford to buy the new washing machine, Frigidaire, cars etc... This path lead to a more complexes question of the wealth repartition, political system and more but that's not the subject here.

CONCLUSION

I've always been interested in economics and politics, it's my second field of expertise with technology and design. When I choose the Art Deco subject I've already wanted to link these two different domain that have nothing to do together in appearance.

But when we think about it, we have to admit there must have an impact. Art Deco is a design movement, but a design movement that had changed many things in architecture and industry for instance.

The problematic chosen could seems oriented against art deco but it's not. I think a movement that seeks to grow by convincing (or impose) its rules is a propaganda movement.

Surely, there is extreme like futurism style imposed by the fascist politics in the Italy of Mussolini but we saw how democracy can be also intrusive with colonialism and capitalism.

The most extreme representation of art deco I saw was in the *Bioshock*, a video game acclaimed to have a very well designed dystopian city Rapture where the Art Deco architecture serve the dictator's intentions (you will find the intro below the References part).

Art Deco was a propaganda movement, a propaganda in favour of capitalism, consumerism, and a certain idea of progress. But the dark side was not the capitalism or the consumerism but more the fact that the economic and politic side were hidden.

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Bonus : Intro of Bioshock Game (2007) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3RHenh8vJ8>