

An introduction to Art Deco

Arguably Art Deco – a term coined in the 1960s – isn't one style, but a pastiche of different styles, sources and influences.

Art Deco designers borrowed from historic European movements, as well as contemporary Avant Garde art, the Russian ballets, folk art, exotic and ancient cultures, and the urban imagery of the machine age.

One of Art Deco's key sources was its forerunner, Art Nouveau, the fin de siècle style that fell out of fashion in the years before the First World War (1914 – 18). Key elements of Art Nouveau's visual language, such as plant and floral forms, were borrowed and adapted to create an updated vision, as seen in the stylised naturalistic fabric designs of the Atelier Martine.



Dress fabric, Atelier Martine, 1919, France.

Museum no. T.539-1919. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The more linear, geometric variant of Art Nouveau, such as the work of Josef Hoffmann and Charles Rennie Mackintosh directly fed the Art Deco search for 'modern' forms and decorative motifs. Hofmann's two-handled bowl, a food vessel in gilt brass, with elegant curvilinear handles, inspired many silver designers of the 1920s.



Two handled bowl, designed by Josef Hoffmann, made by Wiener Werkstätte, about 1925, Austria. Museum no. M.41-1972. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Meanwhile, the arts of Africa and East Asia provided rich sources of forms and materials. Archaeological discoveries in the early 1920s fuelled a romantic fascination with early Africa and Mesoamerica. The excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 triggered a proliferation of Egyptian imagery such as lotus flowers, scarabs, hieroglyphics, pylons and pyramids. Read more about [Art Deco's global influences](#).



Furnishing fabric, Steiner & Co, about 1920, England. Museum no. CIRC.668-1966. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

One of the most pivotal moments for Art Deco (known then as 'Style Moderne') was the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925.



Woodblock poster, Robert Bonfils, 1925, France. Museum no. E.1200-1925. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The exhibition, dedicated to the display of modern decorative arts, brought together thousands of designers from all over Europe and beyond, including Emile Jacques Ruhlmann and René Lalique. Both designers were known for their exquisite detail and sense for quality. They became prominent promoters of the early Art Deco movement, putting their own modern spin on traditional craftsmanship.



Ceylan, vase, designed by René Jules Lalique, made by Lalique glassworks, 1924, France. Museum no. CIRC.755-1969. © Victoria & Albert

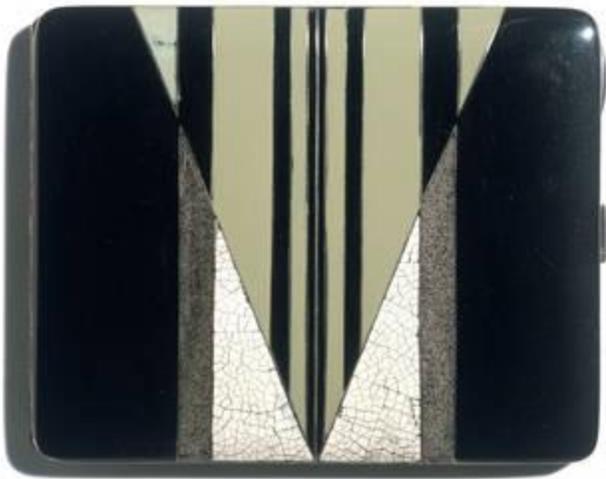


Museum, London

Jacques Ruhlmann, 1919 – 1923, France. Museum no. W.14:1 to 6-1980. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Dressing table, Emile

As the 1920s advanced, many designers turned to the new visual language, colour and iconography of the Avant Garde. Movements such as Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, De Stijl, Suprematism and Constructivism – frequently bundled together under the label of 'Cubism' – were eagerly absorbed by designers seeking to capture the dynamism of the modern world. British and American critics often used the terms 'Moderne', 'Jazz Moderne' or 'Zigzag Moderne' to characterise such work. Geometric forms worked their way into all aspects of life, including everyday small items such as vanity boxes, cigarette cases, and tableware.



Cigarette case, Gérard Sandoz, about 1929, France. Museum no. CIRC.329-1972. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London



Tea service, Harry George Murphy, 1933 – 1934, England. Museum no. M.6 to 6b 1985. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

The stock market crash of 1929 saw the optimism of the 1920s gradually decline. By the mid 1930s, Art Deco was being derided as a gaudy, false image of luxury. By the outbreak of the Second World War, this hostility had become intense. Despite its demise, however, Art Deco made a fundamental impact on subsequent design. Its triumph is exemplified in Poul Henningsen's PH lamp, manufactured by Louis Poulsen, which has been in continuous production with minor modifications ever since it was first introduced.



Table lamp, designed by Poul Henningsen, made by Louis Poulsen, 1927, Denmark. Museum no. M.26-1992. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Art Deco's widespread application and enduring influence prove that its appeal is based on more than simple visual allure. Its strength comes from its willingness to embrace the duality of tradition and modernity, marrying luxury and function in a versatile way. These qualities and characteristics can be enjoyed, in their many guises, throughout our collections, from [fashion](#) to [furniture](#).

What is Art Deco ?

For the style generally known as Art Nouveau, there are now as many names as letters in the alphabet. M. Maurice Rheims lists them in his two books *L'Objet 1900* and *L'Art 1900*:

Art Nouveau	Yachting style
Style 1900	Glasgow School
Style nouille	Fin de siècle
Style Liberty	Modernista
Style Floréale	Jugendstil
Style Morris	Lilienstil
Style métro	Wellenstil
Style coup de fouet	Belgischestil
Style Maxims	Veldeschestil
Style Anguille	Studio-stil
Style des vingt	Bandwurmstil
Style Gaudi	Paling Stijl
Style Guimard	Sezessionsstil

Some of these names, it must be admitted, are hardly in common use. But all of them arose from the need to give a convenient label, not just to the decorative art of a certain period, but to a certain kind of decorative art within that period.

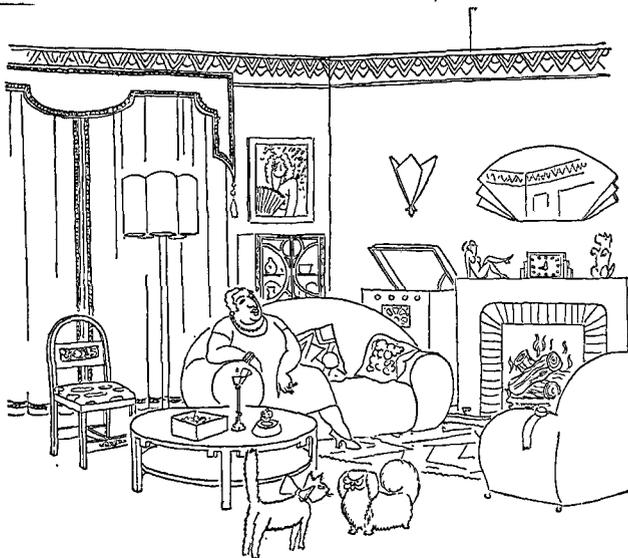
There are already signs of a similar proliferation of names for the distinctive art style which developed in the twenties and thirties; and as this is the first book (discounting manifestoes and critiques of the period itself) to deal with this style, I have had to decide what label to adopt. Continually to refer to 'decorative art of the twenties and thirties' would be inaccurate as well as inelegant: just as all art of the 1890s is not Art Nouveau, so not all art of the 1920s and thirties conforms to the distinctive contemporary style. Besides, by this period the phrase 'decorative art' is itself question-begging, as most scholars now acknowledge that Art Nouveau had done much to blur the old distinction between 'fine art' and 'applied' or 'decorative' art;

while artists of the twenties and thirties thought they had eliminated it altogether—enshrining the new art philosophy in the monstrous word 'beautility'.

The name 'Jazz Modern', which some favour, has an impressionist charm. It suggests the jagged, fragmented nature of the style, and the importance of the North American contribution to it. But to give a book this title would be to risk misleading music lovers. For similar reasons we must reject 'Aztec Airways', the delightful name coined by the art historian Derek Clifford, although it equally indicates the importance of the Central American influence. And we must reluctantly reject out of hand 'Modernistic' and 'Functional' the two cruel words with which Osbert Lancaster brilliantly guyed a style for which he, ensconced in the quoins and groyne of John Betjeman's Gothic re-revival, could feel little sympathy.

That leaves us with the various foreign terms. As with Art Nouveau, there have been attempts to name the style after its inspirers and most eminent practitioners—Style Poiret and Style Chanel after the couturiers Paul Poiret and Coco Chanel; Bauhaus after the famous design school of Walter Gropius; Esprit Nouveau after the movement led by Ozenfant and Le Corbusier; Stijl after the 'radical renewal of art' in Holland by Van Doesburg, Oud and Mondrian. In *L'Art Vivant* (1931) the critic Henri Martinie suggested 'Style Puiforcat' after the silversmith Jean Puiforcat, a revolutionary designer who certainly expressed the essence of the style with genius.

Rather than personify a style which so much tended towards the abstract and socialistic, I have preferred to choose one of the several terms that derive from the great Paris exhibition of 1925—L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. It was at this exhibition that the new style was first presented to the world as something obviously new, if not yet fully formulated. So the style has been variously named 'Paris 25', 'Style 1925' and 'La Mode 1925'. The important commemorative exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, in 1966 was entitled 'Les Années



'Modernistic' by Osbert Lancaster, drawn 1938. Courtesy of the artist and of John Murray, Ltd

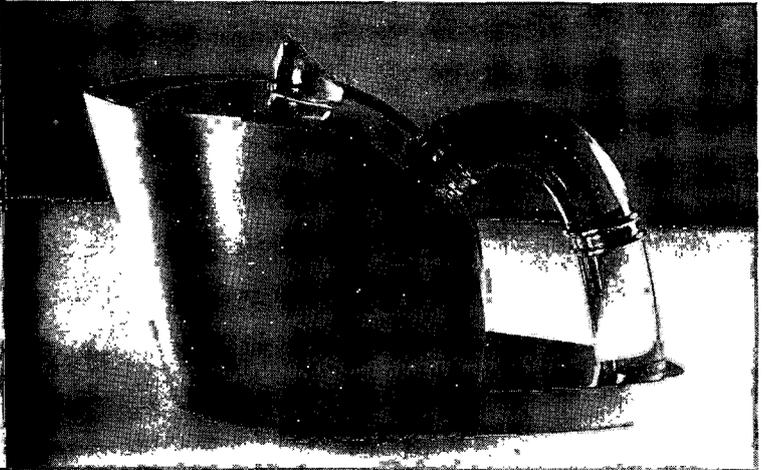
25'; but the sub-title to the catalogue was 'Art Déco'. I have chosen this latter name, for four main reasons. First, it is easily anglicized, simply by removing the accent. Secondly, this name has a similarity to Art Nouveau which rightly suggests a kinship between the two styles. Thirdly, 'Art Deco', unlike the other names, does not associate the style only with the 1920s. Though it originated in the twenties, it was a developing style which attained its most complete and even extravagant expression in the thirties. Finally, Art Deco is already a name in reasonably common use. On November 2, 1966, *The Times*, London, devoted almost a full page to an article entitled 'Art Deco' by Hilary Gelson, in which she spoke of 'the style now known by connoisseurs as Art Deco'. Exactly a year later, on November 2, 1967, the French magazine *Elle* gave 22 pages to 'Les Arts Déco', with articles on Van Dongen, Chanel and André Groult furniture.

I do not, at this stage, want to commit myself to a full-scale definition of Art Deco: that is really the intention of this book. No brief definition will do. Just as Art Nouveau could comprehend both the voluptuous



'Functional' by Osbert Lancaster, drawn 1938. Courtesy of the artist and of John Murray, Ltd

poster designs of Mucha and the severe furniture designs of Mackmurdo, so Art Deco can be held to cover the Ballet Russe fripperies of Erté as well as the 'architectural nudism' of Le Corbusier. But as it is useful to have a rough idea of what is meant by Art Deco before a comprehensive view begins to appear, I would suggest this as a working definition: an assertively modern style, developing in the 1920s and reaching its high point in the thirties; it drew inspiration from various sources, including the more austere side of Art Nouveau, cubism, the Russian Ballet, American Indian art and the Bauhaus; it was a classical style in that, like neo-classicism but unlike Rococo or Art Nouveau, it ran to symmetry rather than asymmetry, and to the rectilinear rather than the curvilinear; it responded to the demands of the machine and of new materials such as plastics, ferro-concrete and vita-glass; and its ultimate aim was to end the old conflict between art and industry, the old snobbish distinction between artist and artisan, partly by making artists adept at crafts, but still more by adapting design to the requirements of mass-production.



The revolution in design: silver-gilt *verseuse* with rock crystal handle by Jean Puiforcat, 1937; *opposite* silver teapot by Boucheron, 1903

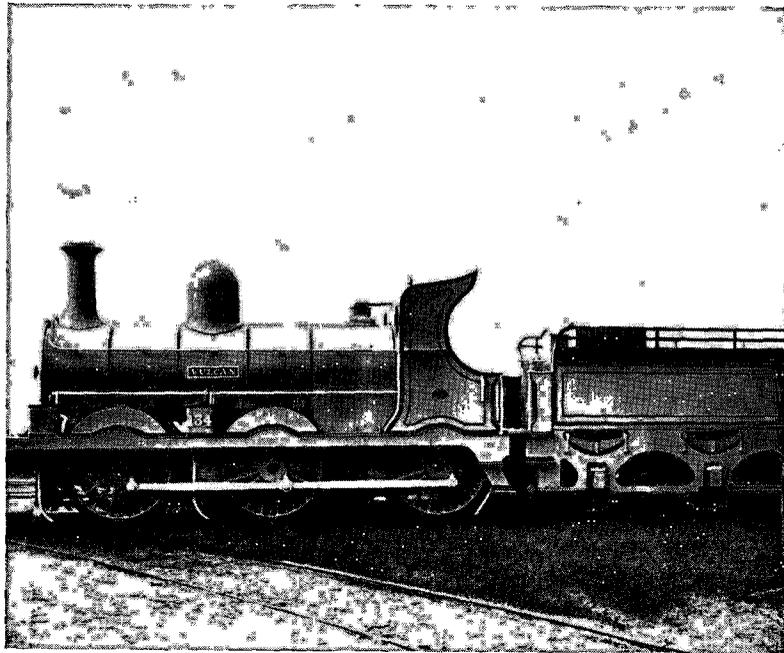
How Art Deco developed

No great change in design has ever been achieved so rapidly as that which took place between the two world wars. How radical it was can be judged by a comparison of the Boucheron teapot of 1903 and the Puiforcat *verseuse* of 1937. The Boucheron teapot is cluttered with vegetable detail, and despite the strong Art Nouveau tendency of the handle, is largely traditional in shape. All detail has been sacrificed to function in the Puiforcat *verseuse*: there is nothing here for which we can find an historic precedent in European silverwork. While the natural motion suggested by the Boucheron example is that of a fairground swing-boat, the Puiforcat piece seems to demand to be tilted and

poured from; streamlining and a deliberate top-heaviness give this feeling.

The rejection of historicism was begun by Art Nouveau itself. The nineteenth century had been a century of art revivals—Gothic revival, Baroque revival, Rococo revival, Renaissance revival and Celtic revival. Art Nouveau took an abstract influence from all of these, and absorbed them; but it replaced the narrative, anecdotal element and the dependence on historical formulae of design (such as Renaissance or Baroque *lambrequins* and masks) with forms derived from nature and geometry.

Art Nouveau was also the first style which tried to



Railway engine, the *Vulcan*, with Art Nouveau cab. Atlas Works late nineteenth century

come to terms with industry. The nineteenth-century revivals had been attempts to escape from the Industrial Revolution. The railway engine was then a deadly enemy, ripping up the countryside. Artists would not serve the Railway King and his many mansions; the engineers must manage as best they could. (They did; and the great iron bridges and railway stations were among the results.) But now artists were prepared to cooperate, as the jaunty Art Nouveau cab of the *Vulcan* shows. The Pre-Raphaelite William Morris, exponent of a kind of finished-by-hand socialism, grudgingly

conceded the first condition of a peace treaty. He hated the idea of printed pottery, he said; but if, because of mass demand, it had to be printed, let it look like printing and not like a miserable attempt at imitating hand decoration. In other words, there must be truth to the machine as well as 'truth to material'. Morris was the chief influence on the Belgian designer Henri van de Velde, the great theoretician of Art Nouveau, who was one of the first artists to turn his talents to designing functional railway carriages and steamships. In 1906 van de Velde founded the Weimar Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Arts and Crafts), and in 1915 was succeeded as its head, at his own suggestion, by Walter Gropius, who in 1919 amalgamated it with the Weimar Hochschule für Bildende Kunst (Academy of Fine Art) under the name of Das Staatliche Bauhaus Weimar. And Gropius was greatly influenced by van de Velde's work *Les Formules* (1917). Art Nouveau and Art Deco are linked by this apostolic succession.

But Art Nouveau failed to solve the central problem of how to reconcile art and industry. Dr S.Tschudi Madsen, the scholar who has done most to trace the development of Art Nouveau, has also stated very clearly the reasons for its decline:

The theory of art and architecture quickly developed beyond the Art Nouveau stage because Art Nouveau offered no solution to the problem of how to relate the machine to aesthetic norms; Art Nouveau theories were, in fact, based on the artist, and on a purely individual artistic approach to the artefact. It was perfectly natural for society in the nineteenth century to turn to the artist to solve the form-problems posed by machines and to insist on beauty of form; yet pictorial artists had no special aptitude for designing everyday objects nor of coping with the problems posed by machines. Only Bauhaus could offer a solution. Art Nouveau was largely an 'artist's style', and did not satisfy the demand for simple design suitable for mass production.

The flared cab of the *Vulcan* engine has no organic significance; it is simply an engaging folk-art addition, like the harlequin timbers of a Romany caravan or the 'psychedelic' squiggings on John Lennon's Rolls Royce.

There was a way out of the Art Nouveau tanglewood. Those who first took it—the Glasgow school in Great Britain, and the Wiener Sezession school in Austria—are the true pioneers of Art Deco. The Glasgow school was led by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, his wife, Margaret Macdonald, and Herbert and Frances McNair—the 'Glasgow Four'. A work such as the Mackintosh silver pewter vase, baldly rectangular in form and painted with black squares, has absolutely nothing in common with Art Nouveau on any reasonable definition of that style.

The designs of Edward Gordon Craig, in etchings of about the same time, are even more prophetic; but these were not intended for any practical application, except as possible stage-sets, and though Craig's influence on the graphic arts and stage design was considerable, he cannot be seen as an active influence on the development of Art Deco. The work of the Glasgow Four, on the other hand, exhibited at the eighth Secessionist exhibition in Vienna (1900) and at the Turin exhibition of 1902, had the force of a European revelation. Mackintosh's chief influence was on the Austrians Josef Hoffmann, Joseph Olbrich and Koloman Moser, who had founded the Secession in 1897. They saw Mackintosh's work at the exhibitions, and they frequently met at the house of the Wärndorfers in Vienna, for which Mackintosh designed a music salon in 1902.

Silver pewter vase with painted black squares. By Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1902. *Mario Amaya*



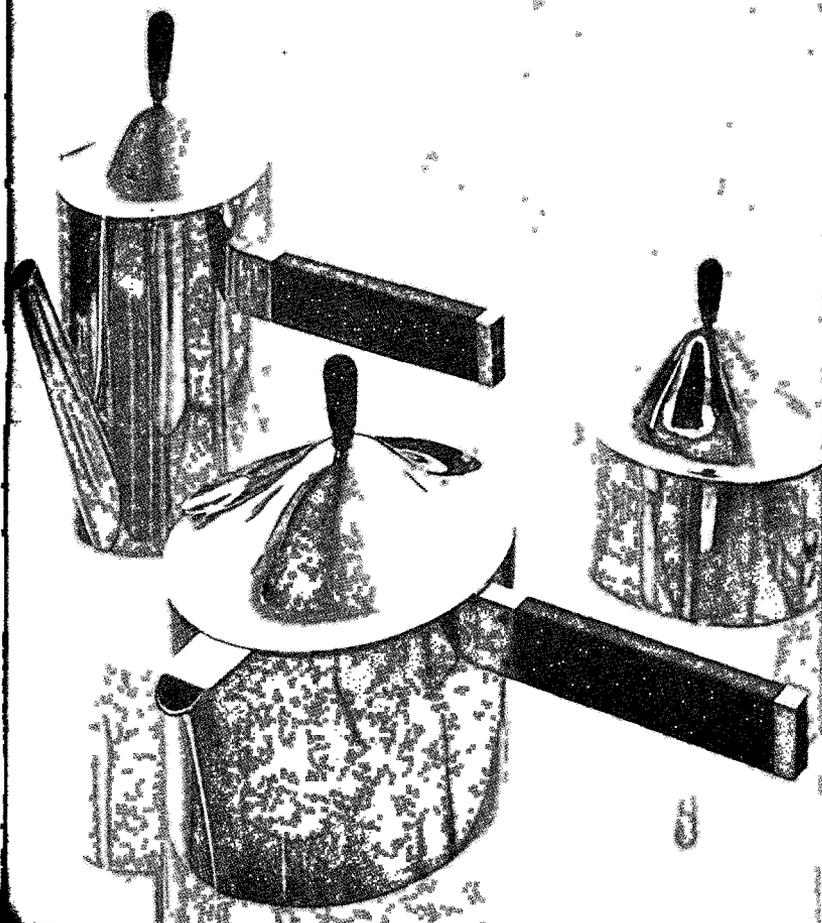


Palais Stoclet, Brussels, by Josef Hoffmann, 1905-11

Hoffmann is best known for his architectural triumph, the Palais Stoclet, Brussels (1905-11). The exterior of the building is almost devoid of Art Nouveau feeling. The square is the dominant motif; and the reticulated beading and pyramidal or ziggurat-style tower anticipate what had become architectural clichés two decades later. But it is an earlier work still, the silver tea service of 1904, that best supports Hoffmann's unstaked claim to be the founder of Art Deco, Puiforcat, perhaps, would not have given the vessels such attenuated knops, would perhaps have integrated the

spouts more surely in the bowls. But it is evident from this service that Hoffmann was through with the form-problems of Art Nouveau. These pieces have the same relation to Art Deco as Juste-Aurèle Meissonnier's silver candlestick to the eighteenth-century Rococo: in them we see neither the first stirrings of a new style, nor its fullest expression, but we do see it for the first time unadulterated.

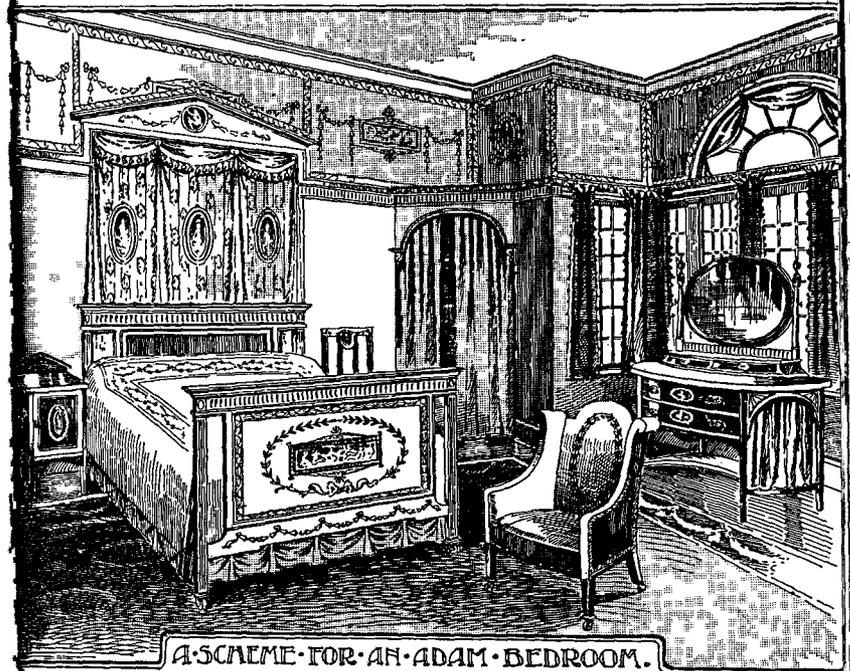
Silver tea service by Josef Hoffmann, about 1904



The Interregnum

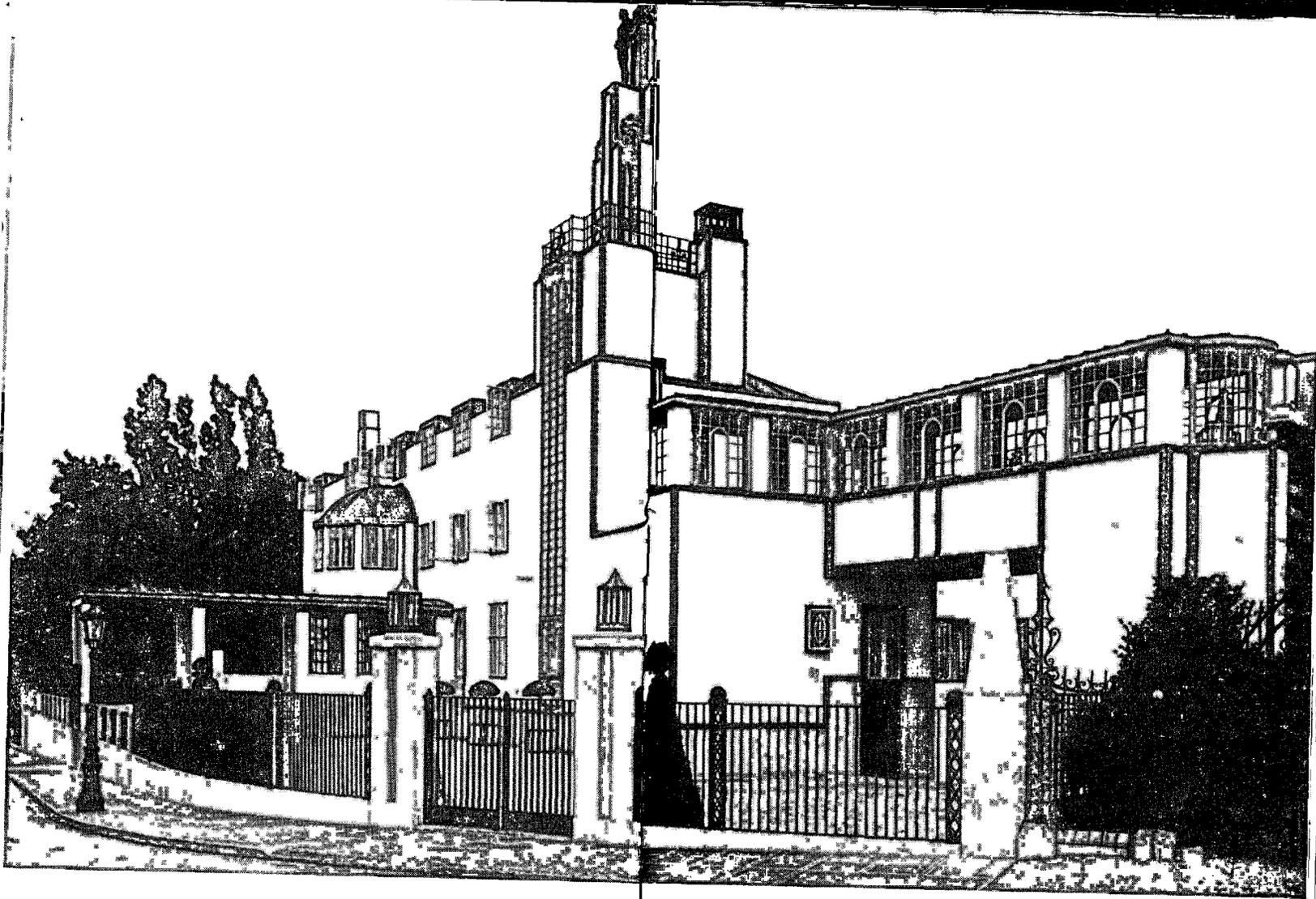
Designers like Mackintosh and Hoffmann represented the extreme *avant garde*. But lesser designers were feeling their way more slowly in the same direction. Between the supremacies of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, there was an uneasy interregnum, a period of transition so exquisitely nasty that no one has been tempted to chronicle it. Its main aspect in England was a revival of Adam, Hepplewhite, Chippendale and Sheraton styles. The same late-eighteenth-century taste was reflected in collecting, in a vogue for mezzotints, much illustrated in the newly-founded *Connoisseur*. In France, there was a return to Louis Seize styles, led by the couturier Paul Poiret and his brother-in-law, the artisan-poet André Groult. It was a happy time for forgers of antique furniture, as we learn from André Mailfert's *Au Pays des Antiquaires: Confidences d'un Maquilleur Professionnel* (1929).

These classical revivals showed the desire for something austere to replace the floreated excesses of Art Nouveau. But inevitably a mere revival—yet *another* revival—could not satisfy for long. The Adam and Louis Seize revivals simply cut the tendrils and tentacles of Art Nouveau. They neither replaced it with something wholly new nor developed the rectilinear strains in it. Emancipation from Art Nouveau and from the ensuing neo-classicism was achieved by the influence on design, before the First World War, of cubism and the Russian Ballet.



A SCHEME FOR AN ADAM BEDROOM.

Adam revival design by H. Pringuer Benn, from *Style Schemes in Antique Furnishing* (1909) by H.P. Shapland



Palais Stoclet, Brussels, by Josef Hoffmann, 1905-11

Influence of Cubism, Expressionism, Futurism, Vorticism

1911 was a crucial year in the development of Art Deco. It was the year in which cubism spread beyond the circle of Picasso and Braque, mainly through the propaganda of Apollinaire. And it was the year in which Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc founded the *Blaue Reiter* (Blue Horseman) group in Munich.

These and other contemporary groups might disagree as to their destination; but they did agree, basically, as to what it was necessary to react against. First, they wanted to get away from impressionism—what Léger crushingly called 'la peinture d'intention'. (This was to be paralleled in literature, especially in poetry, with the replacing of vague and ecstatic effusions supposed to represent 'emotion' with cerebral and concrete images; the pruning of lyricism; Barren Leaves; Waste Lands.) Secondly, these painters were 'ennemis du faux classicisme . . . de la pâte et de la patte' (T.Bouilhet). Kandinsky, who by 1911 had renounced representation, wrote of revivals, in 1910:

Such imitation resembles the antics of apes. Externally, the animal's movements are almost like those of human beings. The monkey sits and holds a book an inch from its nose, turns the pages, makes thoughtful faces, but there is no sense or meaning in any of these actions.

All these artists, then, hoped to establish an art expressive of their own time. Apollinaire had written of Braque in 1908: 'The painter composes his pictures in absolute devotion to complete newness.' What were the qualities of this newness to which the painter must defer? Speed, dynamism, fragmentation, the influence of the machine. Léger wrote in 1914:

A work of art must be significant in its own period, like any other intellectual manifestation whatever . . . If pictorial expression has changed, it is because modern life has made this necessary. The daily life of modern creative artists is much more condensed

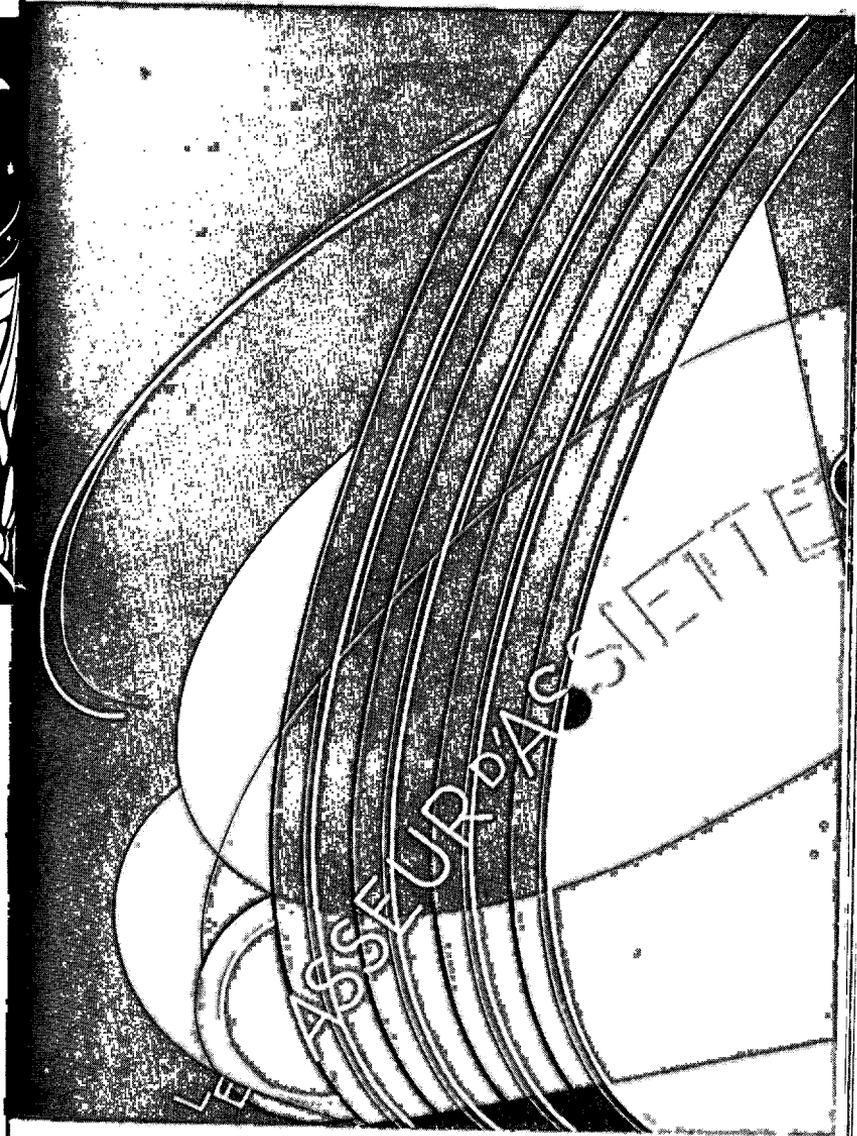
and more complex than that of people in earlier centuries. The thing that is imaged does not stay as still, the object does not exhibit itself as it formerly did. When one crosses a landscape in an automobile or an express train, the landscape loses in descriptive value, but gains in synthetic value; the railway carriage door or the car windscreen, along with the speed imparted to them, have altered the habitual look of things. A modern man registers a hundred times more sensory impressions than an eighteenth-century artist, so that, for instance, our language is full of diminutions and abbreviations. The condensation of the modern picture, its variety, the breaking up of forms, are the result of all this. It is certain that the evolution of means of locomotion, and their speed, have something to do with the new way of seeing.

The city and the machine are inspiration for much of Léger's work in the twenties. But perhaps the artist who most successfully translated speed into art before the First World War, was Franz Marc, an artist more interested in fast animals than in fast machines—an interest reflected in the name of the *Blaue Reiter* group. It was said of him that when he painted a tiger, he painted the 'tiger quality', tigerishness, the emotion aroused by a tiger. The idea of representing the quality or essence of a thing rather than the thing itself, lay behind all these early twentieth-century art movements. So, in 'Versöhnung' (Reconciliation)—a subject which a nineteenth-century artist would have portrayed as a tender scene of clasped hands and melting gazes—Marc illustrates instead the radiance and at the same time the sense of powerfully repressed enmities and released tensions implicit in reconciliation. Creation streams in the firmament. Human and animal forms are dramatically stylized; and the sun-ray and rainbow motifs so typical of Art Deco are already here in 1912. A comparison with Rose Adler's binding for *Le Casseur d'Assiettes* (1924) shows how clairvoyantly Marc's work anticipates the fully formed Art Deco style.

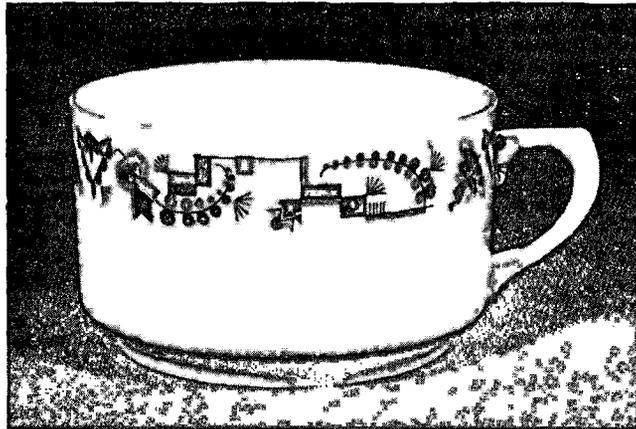
Marc was killed at Verdun in 1916. But Kandinsky, who had to return to Russia in the war, survived to become a teacher in the Bauhaus in 1922. So did Paul Klee, a former associate of the *Blaue Reiter* group. Their influence was therefore widely disseminated—witness



'Versöhnung', by Franz Marc, from *Sturm*, 1912



Binding by Rose Adler for Armand Salacrou's *Le Casseur d'Assiettes* (Paris, 1924). *Pierre Berès*



Continental porcelain cup with Kandinsky-like design, about 1930. *Guy Brett*

the very Kandinsky-like decoration of the porcelain cup shown here.

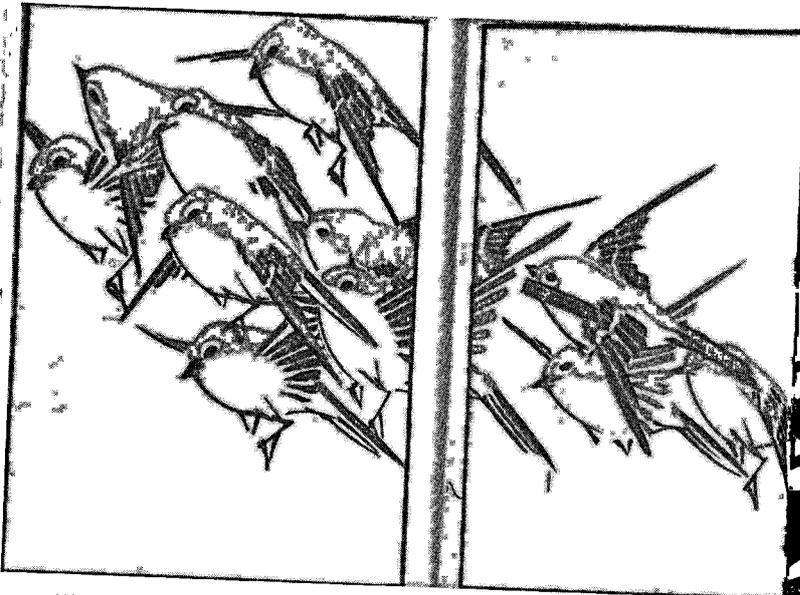
In Italy, the futurists—Severini, Boccioni, Carra, Russolo, Balla—made the capture of movement their first aim. One futurist manifesto complains of the cubists: 'They obstinately continue to paint objects motionless, frozen, and all the static aspects of nature . . . We, on the contrary, with points of view pertaining essentially to the future, seek for a style of motion, a thing which has never been attempted before us . . . To paint from the posing model is an absurdity and an act of mental cowardice.' The futurists sentimentalized machinery: works such as Severini's 'Autobus' of 1912 and his 'Treno Blindato' (Armoured Train) of 1915 do for the machine what Landseer did for the labrador. Like the futurists, the vorticist Wyndham Lewis deplored what he called 'the static side of cubism . . . its *tours-de-force* of taste, and dead arrangements by the tasteful hand without.' Speed was almost tangibly incorporated into his work and that of other vorticists such as Nevinson, William Roberts and McKnight Kauffer. It is not the petrified speed that we find in all those nineteenth-century scenes of racehorses with splayed legs,



'On the way to the trenches' by C.R.W. Nevinson

'The Wedding', by William Roberts, 1920. *John Jesse*





Woodcut illustration of birds by Suiseki, 1820. J.R.Hillier

but a speed just about to rush off the page or canvas. The birds in McKnight Kauffer's *Daily Herald* poster design of 1920 recall those of Siegfried Sassoon's poem 'Everyone Sang', first published in the same year:

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
 And I was filled with such delight
 As prisoned birds must find in freedom
 Winging wildly across the white
 Orchards and dark-green fields; on- on- and out of sight.

But even more they recall Suiseki's design of exactly an hundred years before, reminding us that oriental



Poster design of birds by E. McKnight Kauffer, 1920

influence was still strong in the twenties, as it had been under Art Nouveau. We see it also in the *inro*-like boxes of Clément Mère, in the pottery of Bernard Leach, the *rouge flambé* wares of Doulton, the tassel-handled drawers of Mergier furniture, the vogue for lacquer, kimono-style gowns and the *Fu Manchu* thrillers of Sax Rohmer. Osbert Lancaster recalls that when he visited Paris for the first time in 1920 or 1921, 'what struck me more forcibly than anything else on that first magical evening, many of the cyclists pedalling homewards along the *quais* carried, slung to the handle-bars, a Japanese paper lantern'.

But if artists had to look to the past at all, they preferred to make it an even more newly discovered past—'le passé d'un art nouvellement découvert, du jazz aux masques purs de la Côte d'Ivoire : l'Art nègre' (T. Bouilhet). Babangi masks from the French Congo and Dogon sculpture from the French Sudan were among the formative influences of cubism itself. And the African jazz idiom expressed the fragmentation of life observed by Léger, seemed to express also a careless dissociation with the past.

'Jazz Modern' and 'Modernistic' are both appropriate labels for this period and its art. The 'decadents' of the 1890s had been the first men in history to envisage themselves as the concluders of a century: the phrase *fin de siècle* was first used in Paul Hervieu's *Flirt*. Similarly, the generation which followed felt that they were, or ought to be, distinctively twentieth-century. (One film company even called itself 'Twentieth Century-Fox'.) The art they produced was 'modern art'. What Harold Rosenberg calls 'the tradition of the new' was established.

Influence of the Russian Ballet

G.M. Young once said that Walter Bagehot was not *Victorianorum maximus* (the greatest of the Victorians) but *Victorianum maxime* (the most Victorian of the Victorians).

If Young could ever have brought himself to chronicle what he called the Dirty Twenties, he would surely have had to recognize Harold Acton as, not the greatest man of the Twenties, but the most Twentyish. In Sir Maurice Bowra's memoirs, we see Acton at Oxford, reciting 'The Waste Land' through a megaphone and doffing his hat to geese. Later, he was Evelyn Waugh's best man. He was a comic-opera Prime Minister of the Bright Young Things. Lady Ottoline Morrell, with her violet hair and red-lacquered rooms, was their Queen Mother. Her home, Garsington Manor, was a kind of Medici court for the *jeunesse dorée*. The impact the Russian Ballet made on this generation is therefore almost canonically illustrated by a passage from Acton's *Memoirs of an Aesthete* describing an incident at Garsington:

The scarlet drawing-room glowed with Chinese paintings on glass. Hardly had I walked into it when the others followed, as it had started to rain. Mr Morrell, Lady Ottoline's husband, wore riding-breeches—I forget if he carried a whip. He looked like a country squire with poetic leanings, since his hair was long and he had a flowing tie. To my surprise he seated himself at a pianola and pedalled away at a version of *Scheherezade*.

To me this was one of the most memorable of Diaghileff's ballets; the heavy calm before the storm in the harem: the thunder and lightning of negroes in rose and amber; the fierce orgy of clamorous caresses; the final panic and bloody retribution: death in long-drawn spasms to piercing violins. Rimsky-Korsakoff had painted the tragedy; Bakst had hung it with emerald curtains and silver lamps and carpeted it with rugs from Bokhara and silken cushions; Nijinsky and Karsavina had made it live. For many a young artist *Scheherezade* had been an inspiration equivalent to Gothic architecture for the Romantics or Quattrocento frescoes

for the Pre-Raphaelites. But now I put my hands to my ears and fled, as discreetly as I could. The pianola may have its virtues, but none were apparent in this excruciating travesty.

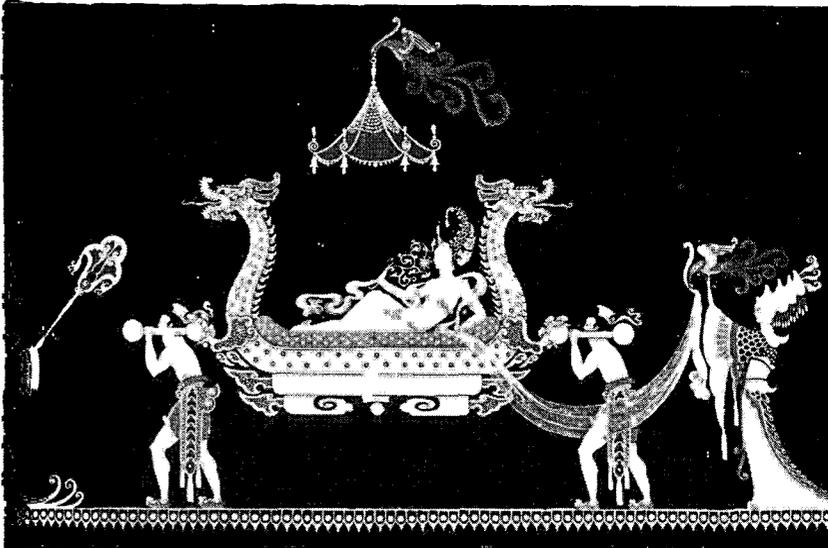
Osbert Lancaster also describes the effect of the Ballet on art in the section of *Homes Sweet Homes* called 'First Russian Ballet Period':

So far-reaching were the changes that this remarkable theatrical venture brought about in the drawing-rooms of the great world that Napoleon's conquest of Egypt (which also littered the *salons* of London and Paris with boat-loads of exotic bric-à-brac) provides the only possible, although inadequate, parallel. Before one could say Nijinsky the pale pastel shades which had reigned supreme on the walls of Mayfair for almost two decades were replaced by a riot of barbaric hues—jade green, purple, every variety of crimson and scarlet, and, above all, orange.

These colours were the best and most lasting legacy of the Russian Ballet to Art Deco. In other ways its influence was retrograde. The neurotic over-ornamentation it encouraged slowed down the progress of art towards simpler rectilinear forms. Promising young artists were directed into Aladdin caves and faun-haunted glades, never to emerge again. Bakst's own designs are inspired; but we can only compare him, as G.M.Young compared Lytton Strachey, to the sage *quem discipuli trucidaverunt stylis suis* (whom his disciples murdered with their pens).

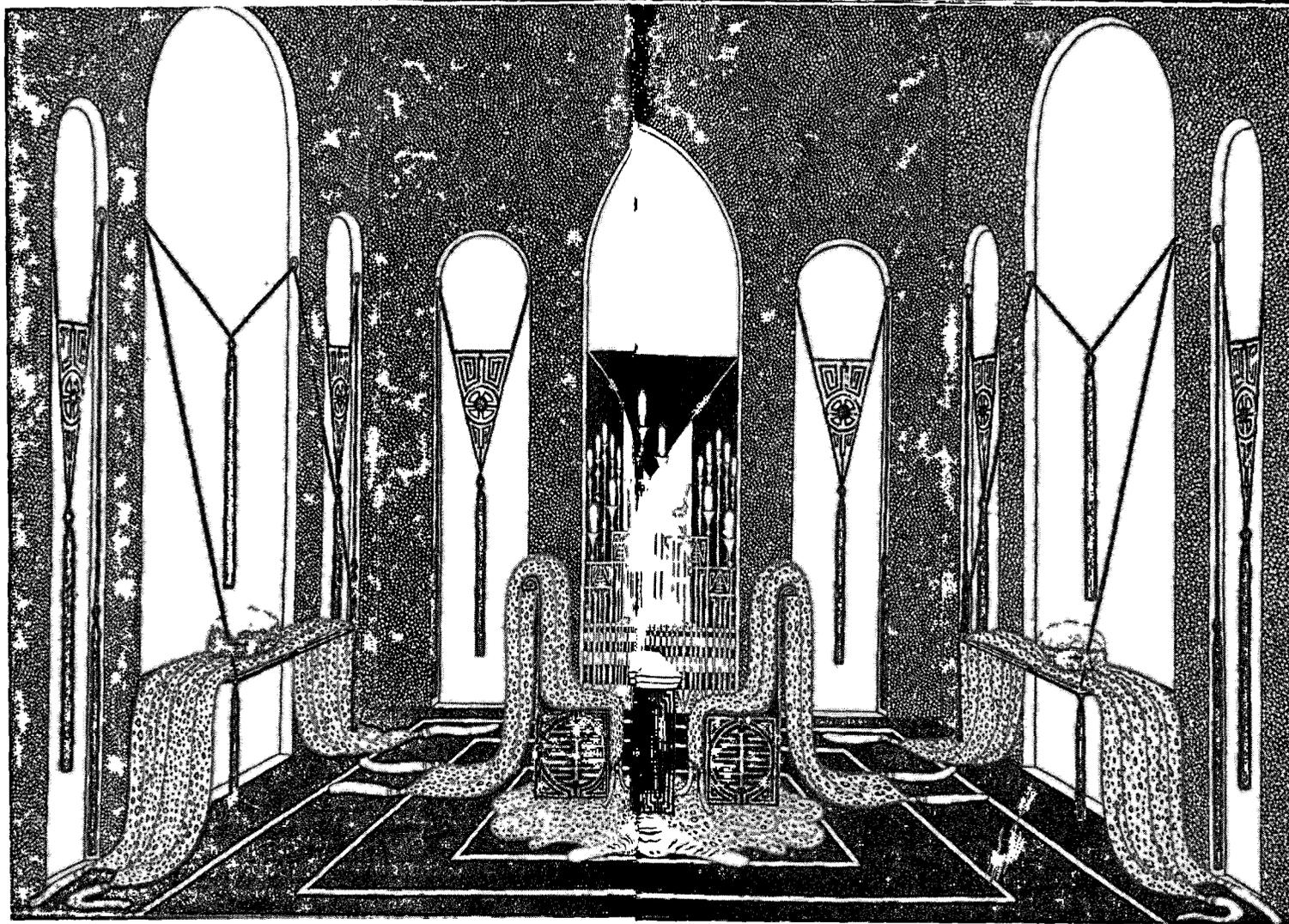
An exception must be made of Erté, a sort of technicolor Beardsley whose work was honoured both in *Les Années 25* in 1966 and in an exhibition mounted by the Grosvenor Gallery in 1967. He was born in 1892 in Petrograd, the son of an admiral in the Imperial navy. (Erté was a *nom-de-plume* made up from the French initials of his name, Romain de Tiroff). In Paris, where he worked with Paul Poiret, he scored his first theatrical success with costumes for Mata Hari in *Le Minaret* (1913). More than half a century later he was to design the revue starring Maurice Chevalier at Expo 67 in Montreal.

The influence of the Russian ballet on Erté's most characteristic work is seen in 'La Princesse Boudour-al-Baldour' from *Aladin*, a tableau for the Folies Bergère



'La Princesse Boudour-al-Baldour' by Erté, 1928. From *Aladin*, tableau for the Folies Bergère. *Lords Gallery*

(1928). 'At the core of Erté's style and art', wrote Mr Charles Spencer in his Grosvenor Gallery catalogue, 'are his Tartar origins, the same oriental inspiration as Bakst and Diaghilev brought to Paris.' In 1925 Erté went to Hollywood, under contract to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. His sets for the film *Paris 25* for that company are among the most wholly satisfying of his designs; but it is typical of his aristocratic attitude that on reading the script, he would have nothing more to do with the film. Osbert Lancaster, indeed, suggests that 'Not the



Design by Erté of dining room set for film *Paris 25*.

commissioned by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. *Grosvenor Gallery*

least of the Russian Ballet's achievements was the social kudos it acquired for art . . . Art came once more to roost among the duchesses'. This, he says, led to 'a wave of modified Bohemianism' and a tendency to regard a room not so much as a place to live in, but as a

setting for a party, so that 'the studio . . . was suddenly much in demand for purely residential purposes'. These social effects of the Ballet were perhaps as important as the lurid colour and rather insensitive playfulness it conferred on the arts.

Influence of American Indian art

Certain critics, especially the more extreme champions of Erté, have claimed too much for the influence of the Russian Ballet. Mr Charles Spencer, for example, has written that:

The oriental influence, stemming directly from Bakst's famous sets and costumes for the ballet *Scheherazade* can be seen in two very unlikely places—the Ideal Boiler building, next to the London Palladium, with its elaborately coloured doors and Egyptian frieze; and the Hoover factory, on the road to London Airport, with similar extravagances. You may recall even more exotic work on the Carreras building in Camden Town before it was stripped of its glory.

Doubtless Bakst would be surprised to learn that his wild and delicate designs were considered the inspiration for the respective shrines of Ideal Boilers and Hoovers; though I suppose the rival claims I want to make for the influence of American Indian art might at first suggest, though in reverse, the sublime inconsequence of Macaulay describing Frederick the Great's rape of Silesia: 'In order that he might rob a neighbour whom he had promised to defend, black men fought on the coast of Coromandel, and red men scalped each other by the Great Lakes of North America'. Yet I believe that in these two buildings, as in Art Deco generally, the influence of American Indian culture was both stronger and more beneficent than that of the Ballet.

By American Indian culture, I mean that of Old and New Mexico, of Brazil, and of North America, the Wild West. The interest in Mexico is especially strong in this period. It is reflected in 'The Conquistador', the ridiculous poem Lypiatt is made to recite by Aldous Huxley in *Antic Hay* (1923):

'Look down on Mexico, Conquistador'—that was the refrain. The Conquistador, Lypiatt had made it clear, was the Artist, and the

Vale of Mexico on which he looked down, the towered cities of Tlacopan and Chalco, of Tenochtitlan and Iztapalapan symbolized—well, it was difficult to say precisely what. The universe, perhaps?

'Look down,' cried Lypiatt, with a quivering voice.

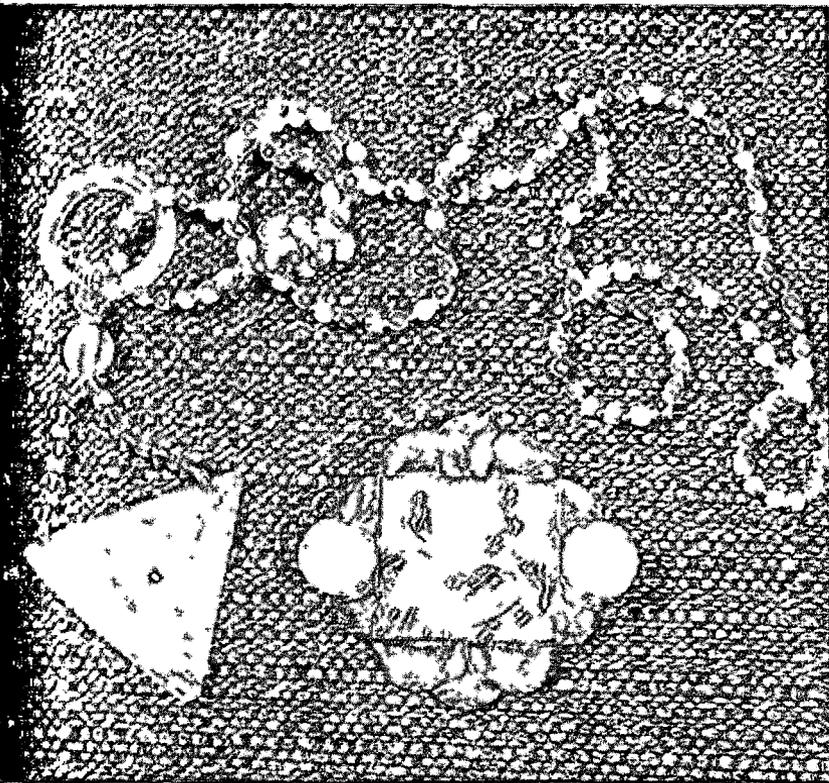
'Look down, Conquistador!
There on the valley's broad green floor,
There lies the lake; the jewelled cities gleam;
Chalco and Tlacopan
Await the coming Man.
Look down on Mexico, Conquistador,
Land of your golden dream.'

Mexico was a land of golden dream for Huxley, and for D.H. Lawrence and Middleton Murry, all of whom dreamed of founding an artistic colony, a utopia, there. Lawrence went to Mexico, painted indifferent landscapes there, and wrote one of his worst novels, *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) about a revival in worship of the ancient Mexican gods. Huxley experimented with *mescaline*, the Mexican 'truth drug'; and in *Brave New World* he produces 'The Savage' from an Indian reservation to show to the new mechanized order the primal innocence it has lost. Malcolm Lowry went to Mexico in 1937 and later made it the background of his novel *Under the Volcano*. In the same year Erté designed the Mexican ballet costumes for *It's in the Bag*. McKnight Kauffer produced a poster for Aztec Bond writing paper (illustrated in *The Studio*, vol. 79). And Jean Puiforcat worked in Mexico, the great silver-mines country, shortly before his death.

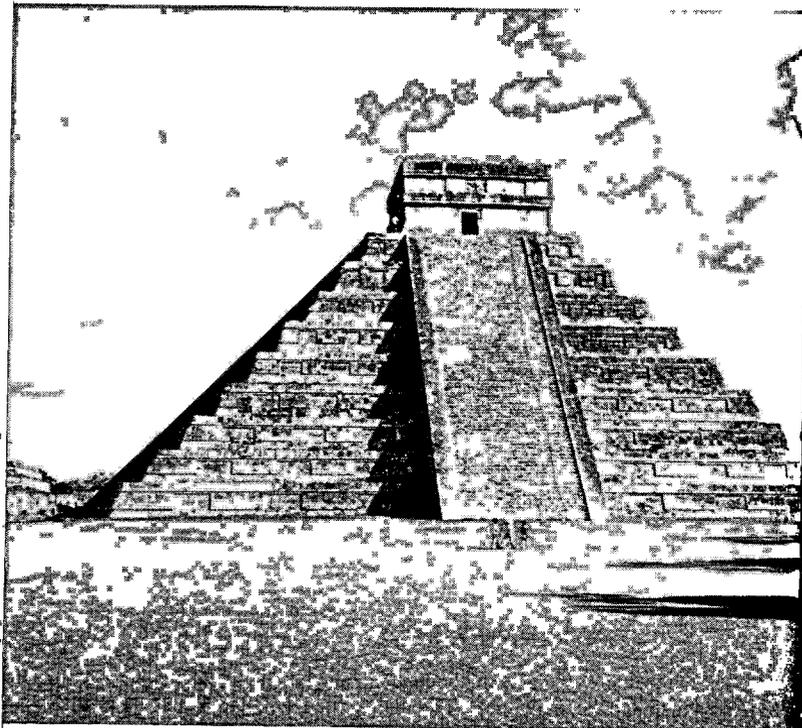
Cacti replaced ferns as interior decorations; in Angus Wilson's short story 'Totentanz' (*Such Darling Dodos*, 1950) when an interior decorator refurbishes a Portman Square mansion, 'his greatest triumph of all was a large lavatory with tubular furniture, American cloth, and cacti in pots. "Let's have a dear old pre-war lav. in the nice old-fashioned Munich style," he had said and the Cappers, wondering, agreed.' Fritz Burmann exhibited a cacti still-life in the Rhineland Jubilee Exhibition of 1925 (see *The Studio*, vol. 90), and Eric



Woven dressing-gown, Austrian, designer unknown, c. 1925. *Sally Jesse*



Left, plastic pendant with coral beads; *right*, gold, lapis lazuli and pink-stained ivory brooch. Both French, c. 1925. *Private collection*

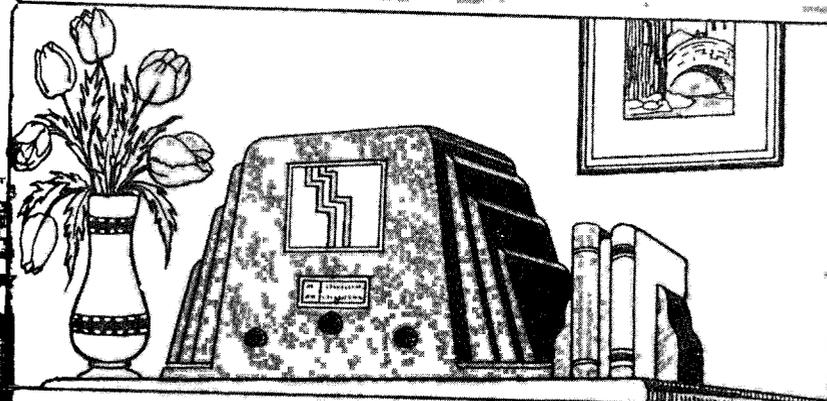


The pyramid of Kukulcán or 'El Castillo', dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent. Chichén Itzá, Mexico

Kennington painted cacti with the clinical vigour he had brought to the features of T.E. Lawrence (one cacti study is illustrated in *The Studio*, vol. 94). And the other Lawrence did not fail to suggest the sexual implications of the plant in *The Plumed Serpent*:

Out of the Mexican soil a bunch of black-tarnished swords bursts up, and a great unfolded bud of the once-flowering monster begins to thrust at the sky. They cut the great phallic bud and crush out the sperm-like juice for the pulque.

Find the Fault

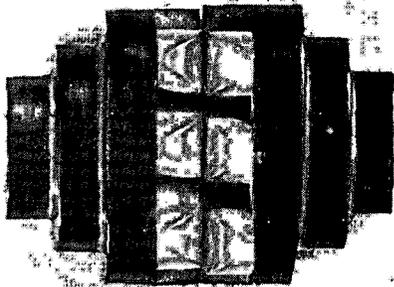


The "Dainty" Series—No. G833
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Playing card from the game 'Find the Fault'. Note 'Aztec temple' shape of wireless set. (The 'fault' is that tulips do not have serrated leaves.) *Anne Mummery*

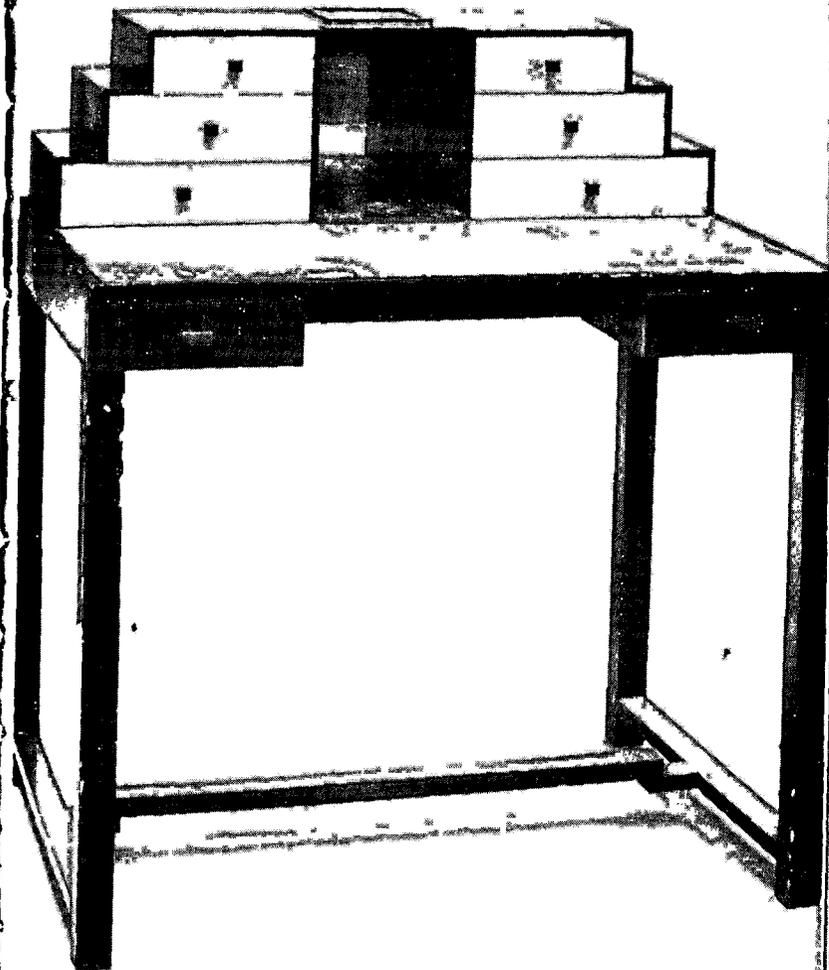
In Christopher Isherwood's novel *The Memorial* (1932), a prose 'Waste Land' which is the nearest I know to eavesdropping on the period, Lady Klein's house contains 'modernized lamps with petal-like bran shades, possibly designed to represent Mexican desert plants'.

But it was the stepped shape of Aztec temples which had the greatest effect on European art. We see it in wireless sets, in plastic buckles, in the *bureau de dame* and of course in architecture itself. The Senate House

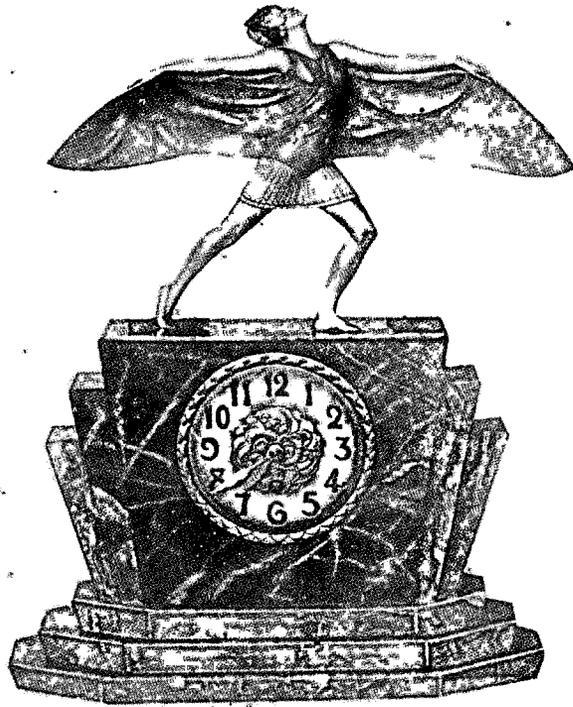


Plastic buckle, red and navy blue, Paris, about 1935, in 'Aztec temple' shape.
Author's collection

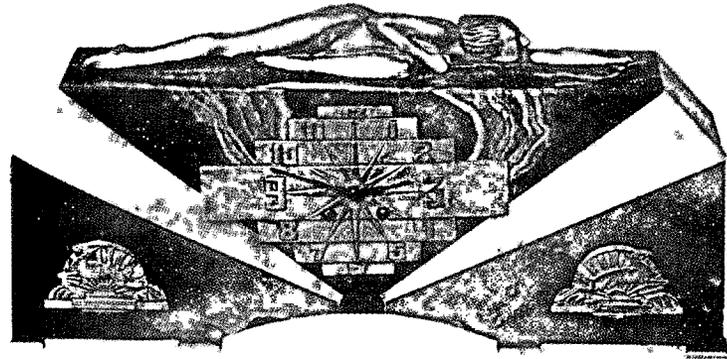
Bureau de dame, showing 'Aztec temple' shape, in lacquered wood, ivory and metal. *Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*



of the University of London is a good example, and this building can almost be associated, like the temple of Quetzalcoatl, with the idea of human sacrifice: in November 1936, Sir Edwin Deller, Principal of the University, was inspecting the new tower when an iron container fell on him and killed him.



Green onyx clock with toned bronze dial, surmounted by 'The Bat Dancer' in bronze and ivory by F.Preiss



Clock in brown, white and green onyx with silver bronze face, mountings and figure of an Amazon by F.Preiss

The materials of Aztec art also came into favour: rock crystal (which Puiforcat combined with his silver with brilliant effect); jade, and obsidian. These substances are hard and uncorrodable—so much so that it is hard to tell whether the 'Aztec crystal skull' in the British Museum is genuine or a fake made with a dentist's drill, since there is no patination. These materials seemed appropriate to an age which was stripping art of its sentiment and corruptibility.

Brazilian onyx, too, was popular in the twenties, and was used, in conjunction with the stepped-pyramid design, on hideous clocks by Preiss (one depicts an Amazon with bow and arrow, another a bat-woman, recalling the vampires of the South American rain forests). Brazil acquired a sinister glamour through the disappearance of Colonel Fawcett in 1925 and the expedition of Peter Fleming (described in *Brazilian Adventure*, 1933) to search for him; though the foundation of the El Dorado Ice Cream Company in 1924 (taken over by J.Lyons in 1961) suggests that the romance of Brazil did not derive wholly from these episodes. The idea of the 'Lost City' took a hold on imagination at this time. Atlantis succeeded Atalanta (see p. 73) as a favourite subject for sculpture. From



Pueblo pottery design from Zuñi, New Mexico

Ideal Boiler building, London

this period date all those stories about Englishmen marooned in Tibet, or being accepted as gods by primitive peoples—though here again there is a precedent, in the novels of Rider Haggard.

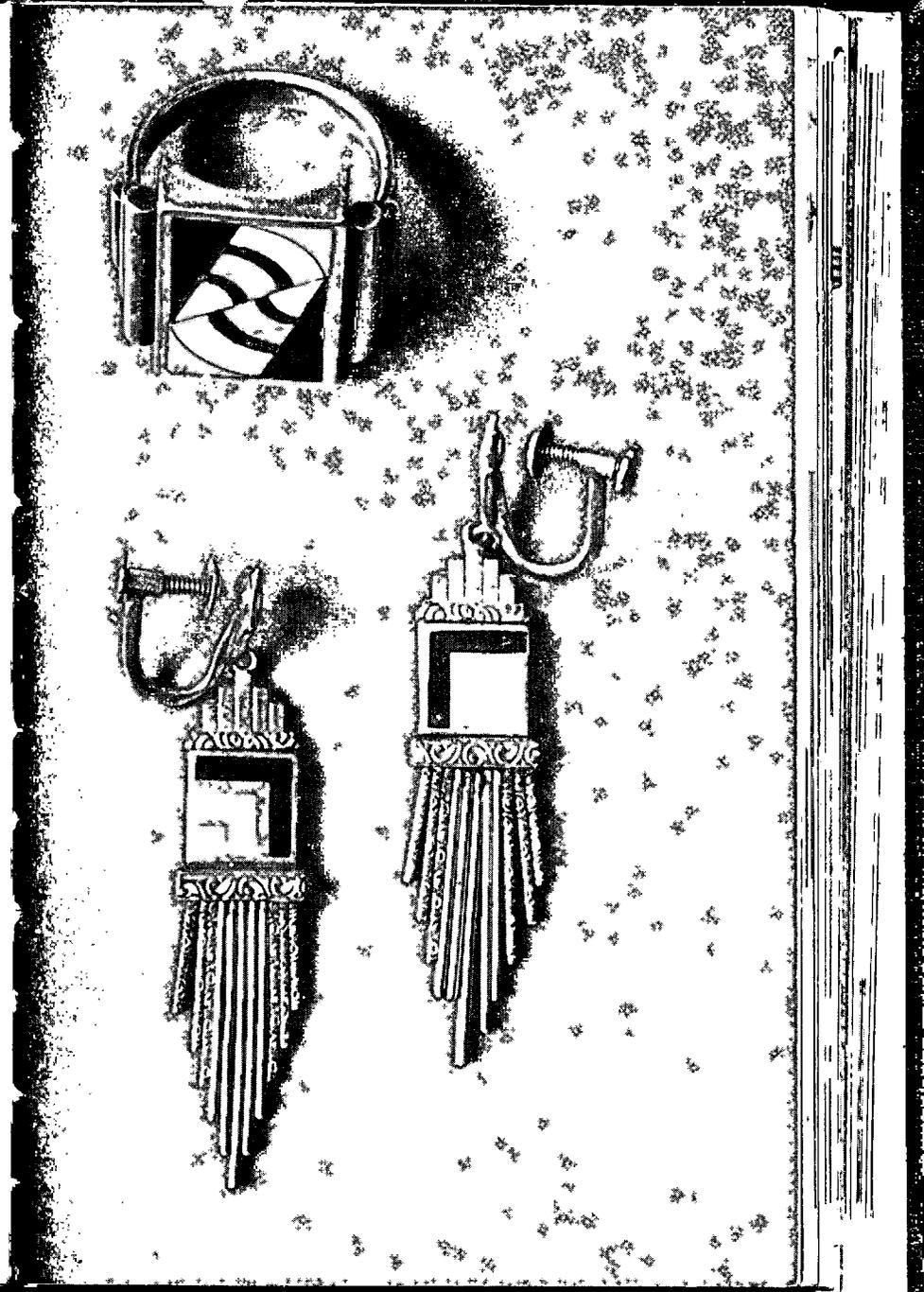
New 'Western' films created interest in the Red Indians of North America, and this is illustrated by the revival, in 1935, of Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha*, by the phenomenal popularity of 'Grey Owl' (an Englishman from Ramsgate who posed as an Indian) and by the title—*Totem*—chosen by Harold Stovin for his 1935 book on the exploitation of youth. The feathered headdress motif insensibly merges with the Assyrian wing motif in the 'flaring-hair' motif of the twenties and thirties.

Indian designs were disseminated by the numerous works on American Indian cultures which appeared in the twenties and thirties. These books are listed in Dorothy Smith Sides' *Decorative Art of the Southwestern Indians* (1936) which gives a *résumé* of the designs and allows us to detect their echoes in European art and architecture. Returning to the Ideal Boiler building and the Hoover factory, for example, we can see that both incorporate the stepped-temple motif, and the design above the door of the Ideal Boiler building suggests a convincing, though not of course exact, analogy in a Pueblo pottery design from Zuñi, New Mexico.

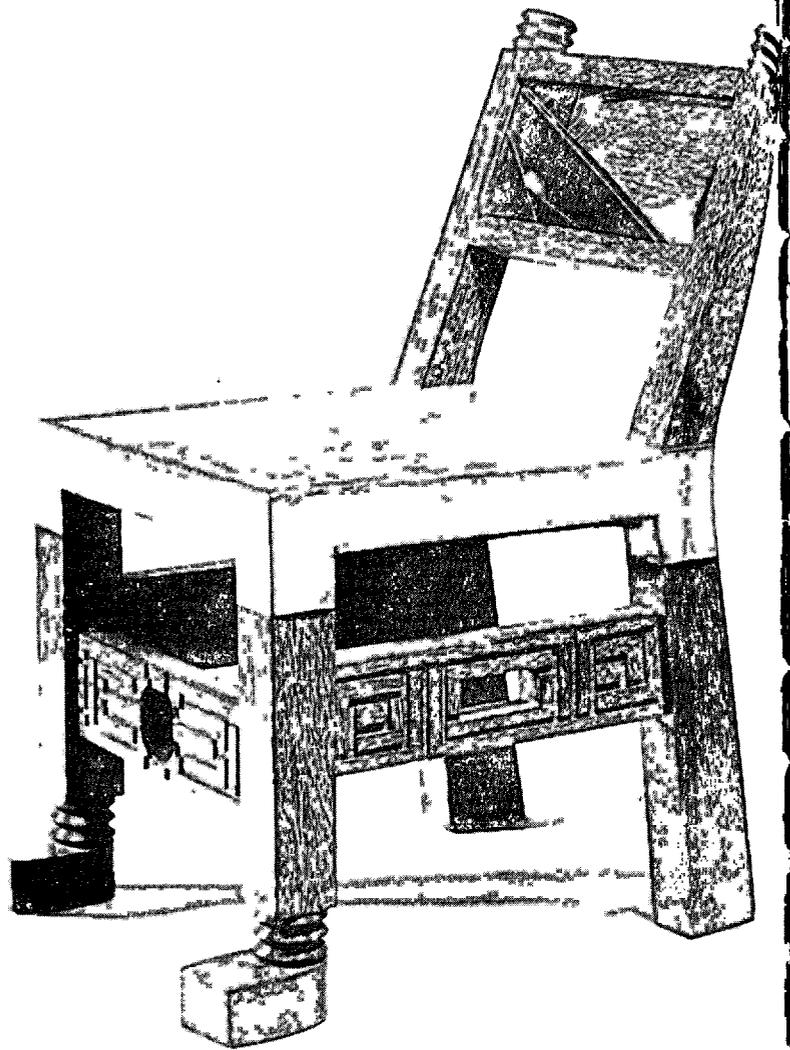


Influence of ancient Egyptian art

The opening of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922 had an effect on European art comparable to that caused by the publications of the archaeologists Napoleon took with him on his Egyptian campaign. It was almost as romantic as finding a 'lost city'. Starlets took to wearing Cleopatra earrings; furniture designers such as Pierre Legrain made chairs like Egyptian thrones. J.J.Garcia's bookbinding of about 1925 is impressed with a majestic sphinx. The Egyptian influence is particularly noticeable in cinemas, with their elaborate friezes of ochre and gold. The shapes of the pyramid and ziggurat joined that of the Aztec temple as models for aspiring architecture.



Gold and enamel ring and earrings, French, c. 1925. *Sally Jesse*



Pierre Legrain, chair c. 1925 in Egyptian style. Palm-wood. *Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris*

Book-binding by J.J.Garcia, Spain, 1925

