



Art Deco Furniture: History & Style

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Learn about Art Deco design, including its techniques and its history. Study examples of Art Deco in interior design and see famous designers who used Art Deco.

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What is Art Deco?

Art Deco is an early 20th century art and design movement that began in France but soon gained enormous global popularity in the **1920s and '30s**. The Art Deco movement influenced architecture, interior design, and fashion and was characterized by clean lines and modernity. As a response to the more elaborate details of the Art Nouveau movement, Art Deco popularized modern, industrial designs created from **man-made materials** like chrome, plastic, and glass.



Art Deco Fashion Design

1920s Art Deco

While trends after the turn of the century were moving toward more sleek and modern designs in general, the Art Deco era gained its footing in 1925 at the Parisian exhibit Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes. The exhibition, which boasted more than 15,000 artists, craftsmen, architects, and designers, attracted large crowds and impressed with its size. A smaller, travelling version of the exhibit toured major European and US cities in the late 1920s.

Taking its cues from the Arts and Crafts movement of the end of the previous century, the exhibition sought to break down the boundaries between "high" arts like painting and sculpture and craft-based arts like interior design, architecture, and fashion. The event included famed fashion designers Erte and Paul Poiret alongside architects and designers like Le Corbusier and Emile-Jaques Ruhlmann. The movement was inspired not only by certain elements of the Art Nouveau movement (with a cleaner and more modern take on them) but also avant-garde movements like Bauhaus, Cubism, and Russian Futurism.



The Empire State Building

While it originated Paris, the influence of this new style spread across Europe and took root in America by the 1930s, where it manifested in contemporary design and popular culture. Hollywood quickly embraced the style in set and costume design, while New York erected numerous Art Deco structures like Rockefeller Center and the Empire State Building. Art Deco even influenced American industry, with both General Motors and Henry Ford creating Art Deco-inspired pavilions at the 1933 Chicago "Century of Progress" World's Fair. Further south, in Miami, Art Deco took hold and inspired the dominant aesthetic of neighborhoods like South Beach.

The term Art Deco was first used by the famous architect and designer, Le Corbusier, who desired even sleeker and less ornamental designs than most of the creatives involved in the initial exhibition. He actually used the term disparagingly to describe his peers, but the name caught on for the entire movement. While the influences of Art Deco would remain, particularly in architecture and furniture design, the 1940s and WWII brought an end to the Art Deco aesthetic, particularly when materials like metal and plastic became scarcer during the war. The style, however, would influence what became the even sleeker mid-century design trends.

Art Deco Design & Style

Art Deco style is known for its clean, sleek, and modern aesthetic. While industrialization was a driving force, Art Deco sought to distinguish itself as a style rooted in luxury, which was characterized by man-made materials like chrome, plastic, and glass. The association between modernity and luxury dominated even the fashion industry, where Bakelite, (a variety of celluloid plastic) was used in jewelry and accessory design. **Lacquering**, in which many coats of resin were applied to a surface to achieve a shiny, hard veneer, was also popular in furniture design. When natural materials were used, they were rare and expensive ones intended to compliment the modern lines of Art Deco style like obsidian, jade, and ivory.

Art Deco prioritized symmetry and geometric shapes, particularly rectangles, triangles, and trapezoids. This is especially evident in the block-like, stacked details of Art Deco architecture. While the previous Art Nouveau movement boasted a preference for natural imagery like trees and flowers, Art Deco transformed these motifs into sleeker, more stylized interpretations. The style also incorporated imagery from other cultures, including Native American, Asian, and Egyptian elements. Art Deco design was also influenced, both in material and details, by industrialization and the modern machine, which is evident in its love of chrome and stainless steel.

Art Deco Interior Design: Furniture

While Art Deco made its mark in architecture and fashion, its impact on furniture design would continue long after its rise in popularity. The movement influenced design trends in furniture through the mid-20th century and beyond. Similar to architecture and fashion, Art Deco furniture was characterized by the use of man-made materials such as **chrome, Bakelite, and plate glass**.

Le Corbusier, who focused on a complete lack of ornamentation in his work, is known for his sleek furniture styles, as well as being one of the first designers who used mass-production to his advantage. French designer **Jaques-Emile Ruhlmann**, known for his luxurious craftsmanship, is considered one of the pre-eminent furniture designers of the Art Deco period. Ruhlmann was able to create Art Deco patterns with exquisite curves and shapes unseen before in furniture design by using exotic woods with beautiful grains like Macassar Ebony and amboyna. Irish designer and architect **Eileen Gray** was the first artist to use lacquering as a major element of her furniture design. Many Art Deco style furnishings involved subtle decorations that were less obvious on first glance including engravings and inlays (a type of embedded decorative design). Art Deco furniture designers also made use of rare materials like ivory, jade, and shagreen (a variety of prepared animal hide) to add natural elements to simpler designs.

Lesson Summary

Art Deco style's influence extended well beyond its rise to popularity in the **1920s and 1930s**. With its preference for man-made materials, Art Deco strove to encapsulate the luxury of industry and technological progress. Designers like **Jaques-Emile Ruhlmann** created sleek, modern pieces with an emphasis on luxury, including rare woods and exquisite details. **Eileen Gray** rose to popularity as the first artist to use the **lacquering** technique, which involved several layers of resin applied to a surface to achieve a hard-shelled veneer. Preferred materials of the Art Deco movement included **chrome, Bakelite plastic, and plate glass**, which were seen as the pinnacle of **man-made** luxury.

Video Transcript

What Is Art Deco?

Art Deco, an art and design style popular in the 1920s and 1930s, began in Paris as a result of a large decorative arts exhibition in 1925. It quickly spread all over the world where it found use in fine art, architecture, fashion design, and decorative arts.

Art Deco celebrated modern life and emphasized luxury and sophistication. Art Deco works featured new materials like chrome, Bakelite (a type of plastic), chrome and plate glass, as well as costly materials like ivory, mahogany, and dark lacquered surfaces. **Lacquering** was a process that coated materials like wood with many layers of resins to create hard shiny surfaces.

When you look at an Art Deco building or object, you see common elements like geometric shapes, often in the form of zigzags or chevrons (upside down V forms). Art Deco emphasized vertical lines and smooth streamlined surfaces and often used bold colors and high contrasts. Art Deco's development in the 1920s coincided with the rise of machines like airplanes, automobiles, and

trains, and elements of these modern industrial things can also be seen filtered into decorative arts. The creation of furniture to fit into new interior spaces figured prominently in Art Deco. Let's look at some examples.

Art Deco Furniture

Furniture created during Art Deco's early years tended to be an expensive luxury. In the 1920s, the major Paris department stores established decorating departments to provide customers with everything from large furniture pieces to light fixtures and cocktail sets.

Some furniture used rich hardwoods like ebony or macassar and also featured **veneers**, or very thin layers of wood used as a surface covering, of exotic woods like zebrawood and mahogany.

Here is an example of a cabinet by **Jacques-Emile Rhulmann**, who lived from 1879 to 1933, a prominent early French Art Deco furniture designer.



Cabinet made by J. E. Rhulmann, 1920s. This cabinet is a beautiful example of Rhulmann and his subtle use of wood grains and inlays to create a sophisticated and elegant design.

Rhulmann used exotic wood to great effect, allowing natural wood grains to emphasize the light linear quality of his designs. His pieces sometimes incorporate subtle curves and don't look bulky or heavy. Even his decorations, as in this example of an ivory inlay of a horse and woman, are sleek and geometric but elegant. **Inlays**, or designs made by setting pieces of substances like ivory, brass or mother-of-pearl flush within a large surface, were a common element of Art Deco furniture.

Other Art Deco furniture incorporated modern materials like aluminum and chrome. Chairs, dressers, and cabinets featured smooth, highly polished surfaces that reflected light, emphasizing their newness and modernity. Bold colors like black and red were popular. If the furniture was upholstered, it often used leather, **shagreen** (which is tanned shark or ray skin), or exotic furs.

Appearing here in this image is an example of high contrast in color and style, with this interior of a first class smoking room from an ocean liner in 1928.



The bold contrast between black and white, the leather upholstery, and strong geometric push of all decorative elements make this a textbook Art Deco interior.

The couch and chairs in this smoking room feature leather upholstery and bold black and white designs. The shapes are geometric but much heavier than Rhulmann's furniture.

Some Art Deco furniture became almost minimalist in its reduction of style to a few elements. Designers like Eileen Gray from Ireland made furniture with lacquered surfaces and tubular steel. In fact, Gray was the first Westerner to learn how to do Japanese lacquering. But Gray later pared down her style to a more geometric minimalist appearance. In this image of her adjustable table, glass and tubular steel form the entire structure.



Adjustable table by Eileen Gray. In this example, Gray has pared down the elements to simple geometric forms and two modern materials

In the 1930s, more mass-produced furniture became available that echoed Art Deco style. Style shifted to become even more streamlined, especially in America. Art Deco declined in popularity by the 1940s, but experienced renewed popularity in the 1960s. If you look around, you can still see elements of it today.

Lesson Summary

Okay, let's take a moment to review. **Art Deco** was a design style popular in the 1920s and 1930s. It found its way into fine and decorative arts and in furniture. It featured modern materials like glass, chrome, and plastic. On some pieces, **lacquering**, which is the process of coating a surface with many layers of resin, created hard shiny surfaces. **Veneers**, or thin layers of expensive exotic woods, were also used for decoration, as were **inlays**, designs made by setting pieces of substances like ivory, brass, or mother-of-pearl flush within a large surface.

Some wood furniture, like that of **Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann**, a prominent early French Art Deco furniture designer, highlighted natural wood grains and inlay decorations for a light, balanced effect. Other furniture was upholstered with leather or **shagreen**, tanned shark or ray skin, and emphasized bold color contrasts. Designers like Eileen Gray began by making lacquered furniture but later pared down their style to very geometric streamlined forms.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do you recognize Art Deco?

Art Deco style can be recognized by its lack of ornamentation and simple lines. Art Deco design often involved geometric shapes and man-made or industrial materials.

What are the key features of Art Deco?

Art Deco was characterized by sleek, modern luxury without extraneous ornamentation. Art Deco designs typically incorporated man-made materials like plastic, chrome, and glass.

What is an example of Art Deco style?

Many New York City landmarks built in the 1930s exhibit Art Deco style, including Rockefeller Center, The Chrysler Building, and the Empire State Building.

