

FOREWORD

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The oceans of the world are liquid highways over which people, commodities, and cultures are transported. The world's great port cities are melting pots of influences, few more so than Hong Kong—which developed as a transshipment hub for cargoes from all over the world.

It is often written that it was the maiden arrival in New York in 1927 of the innovative French trans-Atlantic liner *Île de France* that sparked the great fashion for the Art Deco style there and across America. It is, however, less frequently noted that only a couple of years thereafter the British trans-Pacific liner *Empress of Japan* was placed in service between Vancouver, Hawai'i, and Far Eastern ports including Hong Kong—and that its design perhaps made comparable cultural and aesthetic impacts there.

In the 1930s, Hong Kong was an intensely modern and fashionable place. Burgeoning industries making textiles, clothing and consumer goods and an expansive service economy added to the wealth

already generated through shipping and trading. Cosmopolitanism and prosperity were reflected in modern architecture, sculpture, and graphic design, all of which involved aesthetics that later would be categorised under the Art Deco umbrella. In these senses, Hong Kong was comparable with that other great Chinese port, Shanghai, in both of which urban sophisticates enjoyed up-to-date lifestyles amid elegant surroundings and in which the populations at large frequented large and lavish movie palaces, dance halls, hotels, and other entertainments.

Being at first highly fashionable, Art Deco was bound to become unfashionable as the cycle of taste progressed in the post-WWII decades. But when the cycle advanced further during the 1960s, a revival of interest began. In initial revisionist works, Art Deco was often presented as a style emanating from Paris and incorporating a wide variety of appealing imagery selected from a timespan ranging from the ancient world to an imagined near future and a geographical locus mostly containing the colonies of Europe's great powers. As this book shows, however, during the interwar era, concurrently with the Bauhaus, De Stijl, and L'Esprit Nouveau in Europe, a Chinese avant garde produced highly innovative artworks and graphics with Hong Kong a key centre for progressive thinking and creative practice. Meanwhile, European aesthetes had for long considered Chinese imagery of more traditional kinds to be reflective of rarefied taste. In the early 1930s, a remarkable Art Deco homage to the style of Hong Kong was the Cathay Lounge by Edmund Dulac on the Canadian Pacific trans-Atlantic liner *Empress of Britain* of 1931. It was intended to remind travellers between Liverpool and Montreal that the company also ran a trans-Pacific service to Hong Kong. In the built environment, this cultural cross-fertilisation is embodied in Art Deco buildings that are fascinating in their forms and details and deserving of the appreciation this book provides.

In the mid-1930s, Hong Kong covered a mere 403 square miles, within which around a million people lived and worked. Space was—and remains—at a premium and the city's go-getting commercial culture has left little room for sentimentality with regard to land use. As will be seen in the ensuing narrative, a majority of the magnificent commercial buildings in the Art Deco style have long since been demolished to be superseded by much bigger edifices in more up-to-date architectural idioms. Modern architecture of all kinds has usually been considered expendable—but there is a growing realisation that there is virtue in seeking to retain the best examples from every era to make an interesting cityscape for the benefit of locals and to attract businesspeople and tourists. Two decades ago, a lively public debate accompanied the decision to demolish the Edinburgh Place terminal of the Star Ferry—a very late example of Art Deco's "moderne" derivation, dating from 1957. On that occasion, as was typical, the urge to progress favoured its destruction to make way for a new development. Nonetheless, the attendant news coverage helped to strengthen the case for the conservation of other instances of early and mid-twentieth century buildings, which increasingly are coming to be viewed as forming an important layer of cultural history. In the years since, global digital connectivity has enabled like-minded historians and heritage bodies to connect with each other to share knowledge and bring international attention to important conservation cases.

In documenting and contextualising Hong Kong's Art Deco history and heritage, this book makes most valuable contributions and will hopefully stimulate an increasing affection for the buildings and places that remain to be enjoyed.

FOREWORD

Jennifer Wong

Family Historian

Granddaughter of Liu Jipiao, Architect of the Chinese Section at the 1925
Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, Paris

When I began researching my grandfather, Liu Jipiao, in 2013, I only knew fragments of his story. I had grown up visiting him in New Jersey, where he quietly painted and rarely spoke about his past. I never imagined that one day I would come to know him not just as a painter, but as a visionary architect and designer, one of the first to bring Art Deco to China.

Liu Jipiao studied architecture at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris during the 1920s, where he was swept up in the excitement of a world discovering modern design. He became captivated by Art Deco's bold geometry, elegance, and optimism. But what made his work so unique was the way he adapted these modern ideas to Chinese forms, materials, and symbols. His architectural designs, including his role as chief designer of the 1929 West Lake Expo in Hangzhou, were a groundbreaking fusion of East and West, modern and traditional.

His belief was simple but profound: China could step into modernity and still remain rooted in its identity. That same spirit can be seen across the Art Deco landscape of Hong Kong, a city that, like my grandfather's work, embraces contrast and coexistence, ornament and order, heritage and progress.

In America, far from everything he once knew, my grandfather lived a quiet life of survival, barely making ends meet. He rarely spoke of his past achievements. But twenty years later, in retirement, he began to create once again, filling his home with paintings, each one, I now realise, a quiet conversation with the past he carried inside him. Art remained his language, his lifeline, and his legacy.

Through memories of my mother, Gayook, reconnecting with our family in China and exploring our family archives, I have gained a deeper understanding of the arc of his life. To see his name again associated with the Art Deco movement he helped shape is deeply meaningful, not only for my family, but for the broader story of Chinese Modernism. I hope this book encourages readers to see Hong Kong's Art Deco legacy not just as an architectural style, but as a reflection of the bold individuals, like my grandfather, who built bridges between worlds.

With deepest gratitude,
Jennifer Wong

FOREWORD

Alec Inglis

Chartered Engineer, Member of the Institution of Engineering and Technology
Grandson of William Wheatley Wagstaff, Sculptor of HSBC Lions in Hong Kong

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, Hong Kong residents and organisations were keen to adopt stunning new, Art Deco architecture described and illustrated in this book. Architects developed radical concepts which were translated into elegant and desirable buildings by specialist teams and talented individuals.

Structural engineers designed innovative solutions for buildings which varied from charming villas to stylish hotels and business centres. Engineering specialists in electrical, plumbing, air conditioning, and heating prepared intricate plans and managed construction work. The local workers in all the various trades achieved impressive results. For example, construction of the prestigious HSBC Headquarters Building took only two years.

Hong Kong's prosperity encouraged wealthy clients to introduce the Art Deco movement into designing outdoor features and decorating interiors. This called for the work of sculptors, artists, interior designers, metal workers, ornamental plasterers, stained glass fabricators, terrazzo

installers, and other specialists. They all embraced Art Deco and caught the spirits of the architects' ideas.

For example, the staff in my grandfather's own Shanghai company, W. W. Wagstaff & Sons, incorporated Art Deco styles into sculptures, decorative plaster work, ornamental ceilings, murals, bronze fittings and grills installed in buildings like those illustrated. Perhaps, my grandfather was best known as the sculptor of the pair of large, bronze lions which still sit on either side of the main entrance to the HSBC headquarters at Des Voeux Road Central. They were cast in sections in Shanghai. In 1935 these lions were completed in Hong Kong by Mr. Wagstaff assisted by Mr. Chou Yin Hsiang who had moved from Shanghai and who later set up his own fine arts metal workshop in Hong Kong.

My grandfather enjoyed working with the local craftsmen who respected his knowledge together with his kind and generous nature. He spoke the Shanghainese dialect fluently. Although based in Shanghai, he provided fine arts services and bronze artefacts to his Hong Kong customers. My family had very close commercial links to Arts and Crafts Limited in both Shanghai and Hong Kong. Business in Hong Kong was revived by my uncle, Donald Wagstaff, moving from Shanghai to a home at Kent Road, Kowloon in late 1937. He quickly won several commissions for painting large murals. A year later, his younger brother, Alec, moved to Singapore where he became established as a successful sculptor.

As a grandson of William Wheatley Wagstaff, I have been privileged to hear at firsthand about the vexations, difficulties, and achievements of some of those who contributed to creating some buildings described here. The publication of this long-awaited book is an opportunity to acknowledge the experts, specialists, and skilled craftspeople who constructed and completed Hong Kong's Art Deco buildings.

Alec Inglis
Glasgow, 2025

PREFACE

Art Deco—a seemingly tautological term—consists of two simple words that many assume to be English, yet it is perhaps more complex and abstract than it seems. It is derived from the French term *Arts décoratifs*. It was beyond a phenomenon or period style. It transcended art and decoration. It was not confined within Paris. It could be controversial, perhaps even seen as a form of cultural appropriation. Yet, it remains under-researched, not widely understood, and is often neglected at the peripheries of art, architectural, and design history of Asia.

But is it truly something entirely new, something we have never seen or heard before?

Anyone with a general awareness of Hong Kong's contemporary history will come to realise that they have, in fact, encountered Art Deco and its related heritage. One of the most notable incidents was the demolition of the third-generation Star Ferry Pier in 2006. More than

the disappearance of a sleek landmark which was remembered for its clock tower and streamlined design that once stood at Edinburgh Place in Central, it also marked a turning point in Hong Kong's heritage conservation development. As civic and community efforts to save the pier were in vain, its destruction and aftermath drew attention to "younger" heritage of the twentieth century.

Conventionally regarded as a catalysing moment, the Paris *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* of 1925 remains a defining point in history. The year 2025 witnessed a centenary celebration dedicated to Art Deco—an interdisciplinary art, architecture, and design movement that shaped and laid an integral foundation for aesthetics as we know today. Retrospective events, and publications honouring Art Deco and its spirit, however, continue well beyond the centenary itself.

With a primary focus on architecture, this book invites you to discover and understand Art Deco heritage in Hong Kong, and unveil the myriad faces of this enduring style.