

AN INTRODUCTION TO ART DECO

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ART DECO, CREATIVITY, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Unwittingly conspicuous yet often unnamed, Art Deco and its legacies make cameo appearances in our everyday life and contemporary culture, local and international. Traces of Art Deco are recognisable in popular culture and media: The Red Room's zigzag flooring, triangular uplighter floor lamps, and black round-edged armchairs in David Lynch's iconic surrealist 1990s drama *Twin Peaks* is one iconic case. A Hong Kong example is the wood-panelled lift adorned with bold vertical lines and a bronze floor indicator dominated by symmetry and geometry in Cantopop boy group Mirror's Edan Lui's 2022 *Elevator* music video.¹ Art Deco's timelessness and abstraction often serve as a portal, bridging past, present, and future, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination, and transcending geographical locations, dimensions, and spaces.

In Ang Lee's 2007 movie *Lust, Caution*, a three-storey residence with red, rounded balconies supported by cylindrical columns plays a crucial role in the nested narratives surrounding actress Tang Wei's double lives as Wong Chia Chi and Mrs. Mak.² In reality, it was 30 Po Shan Road in the Mid-Levels, now a lost example of Streamline Moderne—a simpler, later variation of Art Deco. Its original geometric decorative grille at the entrance is featured in the theatrical release poster and can be interpreted as a visual symbol of the tangled relationship of Tang and Tony Leung's characters.

Descending from the Mid-Levels to Central, flyers advertising Great Gatsby-themed parties at bars and hotels have become popular since the 2020s, a marketing gimmick and likely a half-hearted tribute to the Roaring Twenties. Not only have little-known buildings in obscure locations fallen prey to redevelopment in Hong Kong, but Art Deco landmarks have also not been salvaged. Palmer & Turner's third-generation 1935 HSBC headquarters was demolished to make way for Norman Foster's iconic design in 1985. The 1957 Star Ferry Pier at Edinburgh Place on Hong Kong Island was demolished in 2006, but crossing Victoria Harbour to Kowloon, the sleek, streamlined

silhouette of Star Ferry still leaves passengers with a perpetual impression of balance and mobility. Stuck in traffic on the Waterloo Road Flyover between Ho Man Tin and Kowloon Tong (where low-rise Art Deco residences prevailed in the 1930s but many have since been demolished), commuters catch glimpses of Maryknoll Convent School's stepped parapet and water tower: through schoolchildren, historic buildings find their first advocates—living reminders to the public of a rare architectural language still overlooked in the city. Beyond these relatively better-known structures, there are countless undocumented examples hidden in the city, only being rediscovered when they are on the verge of demolition, as demonstrated in the case of Cha Kwo Ling Village's Sze Shan Public School, demolished amid opposing voices in May 2025.

WHAT WAS ART DECO'S "SPIRIT OF THE AGE"?

The year 2025 marks the centenary of the Paris *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* of 1925, otherwise also known as the Art Deco Exposition. Prior to this, "nothing [...] could remotely satisfy the urge to create a worthy contemporary art, an art expressive of the age [...] and 'Art Deco' was a distinct style reflecting the sheer joy in the beauty of materials".³ Apart from Art Nouveau, which was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement's emphasis on craftsmanship and nature, there was little attempt to create a contemporary style for over half a century, when man-made materials had barely made their appearance. The exposition therefore intended to commemorate such modern applied arts movements, and to promote the reliance of modern industry on modern arts.⁴ Since then and for several decades, Art Deco permeated virtually every aspect of society of the day, from decorative arts, consumer goods, graphic arts, interior design, to architectural form. Art Deco as a stylistic manner began to gain architectural recognition in the interwar years of New York skyscrapers, as well as in Miami, Napier, Mumbai, Philippines, Shanghai, and so forth. It was a complex and eclectic style, drawing originally from European craft traditions as well as historical sources, such as ancient Egypt and the art of pre-Columbian Meso-America. Despite this conventional reading of Art Deco, recent years witnessed ongoing discussions and discourses from everyday life to political ideologies. In essence, Art Deco's *zeitgeist* ("spirit of the age" in German)

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Figure 0-1

The Chrysler Building in New York, completed in 1930, is often considered as a defining symbol of Art Deco architecture. (Photo by David Shankbone, retouched by Overand; Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0)



captured the spirit of a world that was rapidly modernising, seeking beauty in both mechanical efficiency and ancient mysteries, embodied with exuberance, cultural fusion, as well as optimism and progress of the era.

The term “Art Deco” was coined by art historian Bevis Hillier in the 1960s, and defined as “[...] an assertively modern style developing in the 1920’s 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 its ultimate aim was to end the old conflict between art and industry [...] by adapting design to the requirements of mass-production”.⁵ Historians have moreover argued that “it makes more sense to consider Art Deco as an evolving network of tendencies and motifs rather than a coherent



Figure 0-2
Cathay Theatre, completed in 1932 in Shanghai. It is one of the city's most celebrated examples of Art Deco architecture. (Photo by Leung Yiu Shing, 2025)

movement with a leader, a manifesto, and an ideological program”.⁶ After all, Art Deco is a sublimely intangible construct and is able to continuously evolve, even until this day.

Art Deco finds its origins in Paris, particularly marked by the 1925 Exposition, but its reach was far beyond France and Europe. How and when did Art Deco first reach China? One particular evident moment was as early as in 1925, with Chinese architect Liu Jipiao 劉既漂 (1900–1992). Liu was the architect and general director of the Chinese Section at the 1925 Paris Exposition, as well as designing the official brochure for the section. The entrance of the Chinese Section at the 1925 Exposition embodies a blend of intricate Chinese decorations taking the form of cloud and dragon motifs with abstract modern angular patterns on the architrave, foreshadowing his later pursuits in merging architecture and art.



Figure 0-3

A photograph capturing Liu Jipiao (first from right) at the entrance of the Chinese Section at the 1925 International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts. (Reproduced with permission from Bibliothèque nationale de France)

In 1928, together with pioneering modern Chinese painter and art educator Lin Fengmian (1900–1991), Liu Jipiao established the Hangzhou National Academy of Art (now China Academy of Art) and the avant-garde “China’s Art Movement”.⁷ Their aims for the Academy were: “To introduce Western art; reorganize Chinese art, combine Chinese and Western art, and create an art for this epoch.”⁸ The following year, Liu Jipiao’s designs for the Hangzhou West Lake Exposition was evident in displaying his aspirations for what he termed “Architecture as Fine Art”. The architectures at the West Lake Exposition are characterised by streamlined forms and relief or stepped-back techniques with abstract Chinese decorations. In Liu’s article “West Lake Exposition and Architecture as Fine Arts”, he had written:

I intend for the nation to learn about “architecture as fine arts” at the West Lake Exposition. Architecture as fine arts is a combination of science and arts; one not only needs to understand engineering and other sciences, but also understand fine arts.⁹

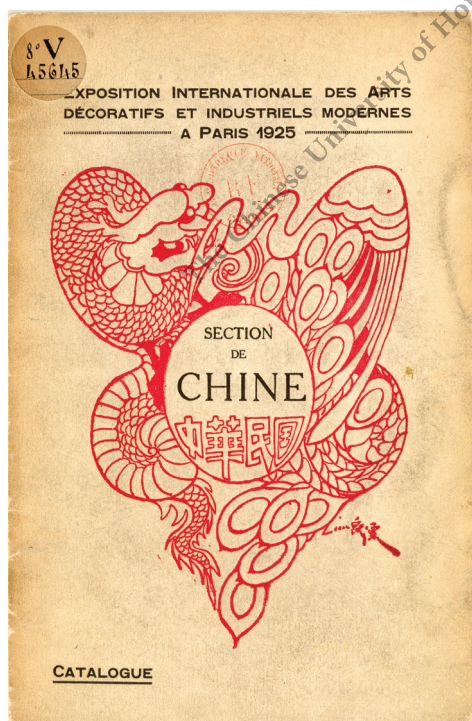


Figure 0-4
Catalogue cover of the “Chinese Section” at the 1925 Paris Exposition, also designed by Liu Jipiao. (Reproduced with permission from Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Although it is uncertain as to what impact Liu Jipiao and his writings¹⁰ had upon other Chinese architects and cities, we do know he was already practising in both Shanghai and Hong Kong by 1929, according to the advertisement of his architectural office. Liu's works ultimately highlight the efforts of a Chinese architect to emerge from mere "stylistic" application of architecture and seeking to find meaning in the merging of Chinese and Western traditions.

Several global studies on Art Deco are worth mentioning. Edson Cabalfin argued that Art Deco during the interwar period can be highly politicised and ideological, and his critical historiography on *Philippine Art Deco Architectures* revealed that the "Art Deco style in the Philippines can be understood both as the imposition of power by the colonizer and the demonstration of resistance of the colonized".¹¹ In fact, he suggested that Art Deco architectures participated in the formation of new lifestyles by being the instruments of propaganda of modern living conditions, particularly during the American colonial period in the Philippines. Prudence Lau has previously researched on Art Deco in British India, focusing on the struggle of certain Indian-born but British-educated architects in choosing between the traditional colonial Indian architectural styles

Figure 0-5

Advertisement of Liu Jipiao's (Liou Kipaul) architectural practice, indicating that by 1929 he had offices in Hangzhou, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. (Liangyou 良友 [Good Companion] 35 [1929]: 37)

LIU KIPAUL
ARCHITECT

Designer for
Bank, Hotel, Theatre
School & College
All Sorts of Buildings
for particulars
Apply at
Hangchow—46 Pinghai Road
Shanghai—632 S. Wenhou Li
Harden Road.
Hongkong—King Cheng
9 W. Wyndham St.

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本建築師承辦各埠銀行，旅館，戲院，學校，
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海內外人士委託，業務益廣，恐遠道來信週知
，特將通訊處開列如左：
事務所
杭州，平海路四十六號
上海，哈同路民厚里六三二號
香港，文咸西街九號敬啟

or Art Deco in designing modern buildings including cinemas.¹² She argued that Art Deco architecture in Bombay and for these particular architects was a reaction against imperialism as well as a negotiation between tradition and modernity in architecture. In the Chinese context, Leo Ou-fan Lee has indicated that the lavish ornamentation of the Art Deco style became “a new mediation between the neoclassicism of British imperial power [...] and the ebullient new spirit of American capitalism”.¹³

Regarding a socio-political analysis of Art Deco and how it entered the patterns and spaces of everyday life, Michael Windover argued that the style was able to “fashion” public cultural spaces throughout the globe in the interwar years and the idea of “mobility” lies at the heart of the style. He located Art Deco buildings including cinemas and department stores in Los Angeles, Bombay (modern Mumbai), and Canada, and explored how Art Deco was both a product and object of public culture in the years between the two World Wars.¹⁴ Other studies have termed cinema buildings as the “universal Art Deco structure” as it provided an “escapist” atmosphere that no other structure can provide.¹⁵ The relationship between cinema buildings with the Art Deco style will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 on commercial, industrial, and utility buildings.

ART DECO AS HONG KONG'S LOOKING GLASS OF MODERNITY

Marshall Bermann, renowned for his 1982 canon *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, has characterised modernity as a historical experience that endlessly seeks to transform the conditions that produce it, and an attitude towards life that is a continuous process of evolution and transformation.¹⁶ Moreover, in Joseph Esherick's essay on “Modernity and Nation in the Chinese City”, he argues that modernity and nationalism are inseparably linked.¹⁷ Inherent also to the search for national identity, local or indigenous identity is the quest for international recognition or the “aim to be noticed as somebody in the world”.¹⁸ Under such a premise, this book will discuss how ideas of modernity are intertwined with the architecture, the architects, as well as the local community in Hong Kong.

Delineating modern Chinese architecture in the early twentieth century, Rowe and Kuan's coedited *Architectural Encounters with Essence and Form in China* observed four architectural attitudes toward modernisation in China.¹⁹ These four approaches were: (1) directly importing Western architectural styles and construction, i.e. neoclassical forms; (2) the adaptive approach, as seen in Henry Murphy's (1877–1954) designs for Ginling College in Nanjing and blending traditional Chinese elements with modern construction methods; (3) shifting further away from traditional (Chinese) architectural forms into simplified and abstract expressions and merging with modern Western design and technology; and (4) documenting and researching Chinese architectural heritage and applying to contemporary design problems, as seen in the work of Liang Sicheng (1901–1972) and Liu Dunzhen (1897–1968), both active members in the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture 中國營造學社 founded in 1930.²⁰ We argue that Art Deco belongs to the third approach, and will focus on such qualities as expressed in certain Hong Kong architecture by analysing them against the context of modern Chinese architectural development in the twentieth century.

Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century, Hong Kong and some other Chinese cities had undergone vast processes of change in urban, societal, and political scenes. From the newfound nationalism at the founding of the Republican government in 1912 to the new political and literary movements in the 1920s, China was undergoing an age of rejecting and reinterpretations of tradition towards new creative, literary, and artistic productions. These movements have been well documented and researched, with literature and discourse critiquing the flowering of “new” and “modern” cultures particularly in cities like Shanghai, which is known for its “treasure trove of Art Deco and Moderne buildings”.²¹ Numerous researches have been published on modern Shanghai culture and Art Deco,²² and until now not a single book, other than an exhibition catalogue,²³ has been published in the context of Hong Kong. In comparison, therefore, Hong Kong was often deemed as a lesser counterpart of certain other Chinese cities, and that it “did not go through architectural transformation in the 1930s as Shanghai did”.²⁴