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SCHRÖDER HOUSE*

09 FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT,
*HOLLYHOCK (BARNSDALL)
HOUSE*

10 RAYMOND HOOD AND
ANDRÉ FOUILHOX, *AMERI-
CAN RADIATOR BUILDING*

25 WILLIAM VAN ALEN,
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31 MAURICE PICAUD (PICO),
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05 ARMAND-ALBERT RATEAU,
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12 ANDRÉ GROULT, *CHIFFON-
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ART DECO

50 WORKS OF ART YOU SHOULD KNOW

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INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1 George Barbier, *Au revoir*, 1920, pochoir, in George Barbier, *Le bonheur du jours, ou, Les graces à la mode*, Paris: Meynial, 1920, The British Library, London

Say “Art Deco” and a succession of images—a sassy long-legged flapper, a tapering skyscraper, a windswept roadster, the zigzag pattern on a cigarette case—flash by like frames of a movie. They seem unrelated, yet each is in sync with an era that exuded glamour, pleasure, and escape. Evocative of a unique historical moment, Art Deco—as it is now called—embodies the passion for modernity that animated the years between World War I and World War II (1918–39). Western society experienced rapidly shifting social and economic fortunes that precipitated incomparable structural, behavioral, and material changes: with dizzying speed nearly every facet of life was recast. Mechanization intruded everywhere, and the dynamic forms and rhythms of factory machinery—from the repetitive geometries of gears to the streamlined volumes of the drive-shaft—imbedded themselves in the public imagination. And a new aesthetic language emerged, characterized by a love for ab-

straction, geometric and linear patterning, and restrained ornamentation. In their inherent shapes and surface decoration, Art Deco creations of all types embraced the modern age—the machine age—and its precisionist vocabulary.

Although perhaps partly a thin-skinned bravura to mask the insecurities of the moment, new attitudes also prevailed. After the trauma of recent war, including the financial and physical ruin of much of Europe, novel life-affirming experiences were the order of the day. Fun, if not joy, was to be grabbed whenever the opportunity presented itself (fig. 1), at the nightclub, racetrack, or tennis court; life was to be savored in every cigarette, cocktail, or outing in a fast car. Cultivated relentlessly, glamour pervaded one’s personal style; the “high” arts of painting and sculpture, architecture and architectural decor, unique one-of-a-kind decorative objects, and even “lowbrow” mass-produced domestic wares. In all realms, the soft curvilinear forms and baroque extravagances of Art Nouveau—already discredited among artists and elite collectors before the war—were dismissed as decadent and old-fashioned. In its place a new mode of personal and artistic expression seemed in keeping with the postwar mood. And an infectious sense of new beginnings left its visual imprint on everything.

Women liberated out of necessity during the war years refused at war’s end to return to the status quo. Standing in for men away at the front, women had worked jobs requiring ease of movement, resulting in

less restrictive clothing with bothersome hair tucked under a cap and/or cut short. The assertive young woman of the Roaring Twenties appeared in her classic shift and bobbed hairdo, sporting ideas about limitless possibilities. Pert and stylish, she featured in innumerable advertising campaigns. She was immortalized as the tomboy in Victor Margueritte's hit novel *La Garçonne* (*The Bachelor Girl*, 1922) and as the flapper heroine of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Convention-breaking stage icons, such as African American Josephine Baker, scandalized and beguiled society. And once getting into the act, Hollywood promoted the modern woman in films distributed worldwide. Whether a "classy dame" played by Claudette Colbert or Greta Garbo's exotic dancer-turned-spy Mata Hari, the beautiful, leggy (and mouthy) movie star became a cultural idol. Coalescing first in Paris between 1908 and 1912, this new modern style took as its starting point the then current mechanized world. But designers also mined many other sources, most importantly historic European styles. At the same time, international exhibitions introduced an expanding range of enticingly "exotic" (to use a contemporary term) non-Western design traditions. Inspiration came from newly discovered (or rediscovered) cultures, as diverse in time and place as ancient Mesoamerica and African tribal arts. Other African inflections, derived from the musical asymmetries and spirit of American Jazz, soaked into the visual rhythms of decorative designs. Photographs reconstructing

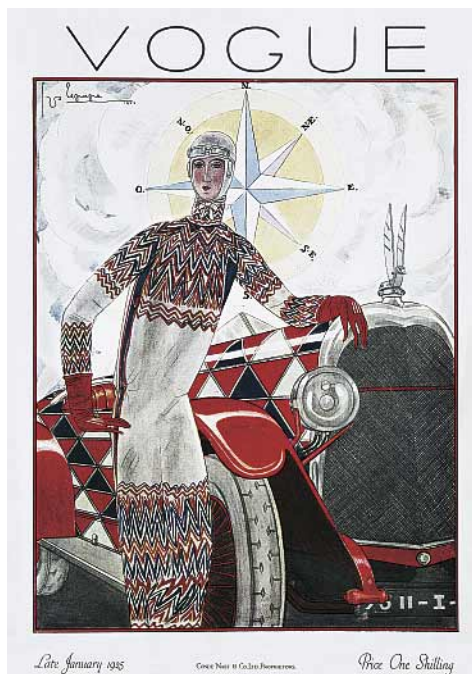


Fig. 2 Georges Lepape, Cover of British *Vogue*, January 1925, photo courtesy of the National Art Library, London

Howard Carter's sensational 1922 discovery of the boy pharaoh Tutankhamen's tomb fueled a worldwide craze for things Egyptian. Concurrently, contemporary art with its succession of avant-garde isms—Cubism, Fauvism, Constructivism, Futurism, Neoplasticism—provided a wellspring of motifs for the innovative designer. Among other formative experiences was the 1909 arrival of Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev and his spectacular ballet troupe. Innovative and edgy, the productions of the Ballets Russes electrified Paris's creative community. Diaghilev's company served as an incubator, fostering innovation in all the performing arts. Not satisfied with the conventional in any field,