

DECONSTRUCTING DECO

How the style of the future became a nostalgic longing for the past

By Michael Gawlik

On Etsy.com, a search for “Art Deco posters” yields over 70,000 results.

There are advertisements for French absinthe and illustrations of Maltese seascapes, covers of Vogue and posters from the World’s Fair. These pieces share a distinct style despite their disparate content. Their colors are bold, their forms geometric, their attitude opulent.

But are they really Art Deco? Yes and no.

Art Deco emerged after World War I, when rapid cultural and technological changes swept across Europe and the United States. As jazz flourished and automobiles became part of everyday life, artists began to reimagine their work and its place in society.

According to design critics Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast, Art Deco artists

“sought to make a style that combined simplicity with dynamism.” With intricate details and symmetrical lines, artists’ work emphasized structure and modernity. Aerodynamic curves evoked a sense of motion, and metallic colors were reminiscent of machinery. Artists rejected the organic shapes used in earlier art and instead highlighted manmade spectacles.

While Art Deco was inspired by both Art Nouveau and the aesthetics of ancient Egypt, it was never nostalgic. The movement was always oriented towards the future. In the United States, it became a symbol of social mobility after gaining popularity with advertisers. For the first time in American history, middle-class consumers were seeing the same visual culture that enamored their bourgeois peers. Art Deco promised them a more equal future.

The stock market crash of 1929 dashed that sense of hope. While Art Deco retained some popularity throughout the Great Depression, it was unseated at the onset of World War II, when utilitarian styles became the norm. After the war, Art Deco never quite returned to its former glory. The turbulent last decades of the twentieth century—marked by the Vietnam War, the 1970s recession and emerging conflicts in the Middle East—didn’t suit a movement rooted in prosperity.

But Art Deco hasn’t disappeared. In January 2020, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez named her dog “Deco” to honor the movement, which she said was “inspired by themes of optimism and social and technological progress.”

A cursory search on Etsy shows that artists continue to draw inspiration from Art Deco. While some of the posters found on Etsy are prints from the 1920s, many

are computer-generated pieces made in the twenty-first century. Artists like Mads Berg have found great commercial success in using exclusively Art Deco techniques.

For modern audiences, Art Deco is a distinctly vintage style. It evokes a sense of time and place, transporting viewers back to New York or Naples in the 1920s, a period popularly remembered as the height of glamor.

It’s not difficult to see why Americans look to this moment for comfort. According to a 2019 Pew Research Center Poll, Americans are pessimistic about the country’s future. Over half believe that the economy will falter and the United States’ international standing will decline by 2050. According to Pew, these concerns are due to eroding trust in the increasingly polarized American political system.

But there’s danger in looking too fondly on the past. The cultural and technological progress of the 1920s disproportionately benefitted specific groups of people at the cost of others.

On top of that, nostalgia for this period runs counter to everything that Art Deco represented. The movement was more than an artistic style; it was about embracing the present and looking to the future with excitement. Its distinctive features—sharp geometry, metallic colors—were not simply aesthetic choices, but rather consequences of a specific historical moment.

It’s impossible for contemporary artists to replicate Art Deco techniques without betraying its intellectual principles. But that doesn’t mean that they won’t try—or that they won’t have eager, nostalgic customers ready to frame and hang their work.