

Art Deco at Fair Park

Teacher's Materials

Fair Park is home to one of the greatest concentrations of early 20th century Art Deco exposition buildings in the world. For the Texas Centennial Exposition and World's Fair of 1936, a total of fifty structures were erected. Twenty-one of those survive today, including the centerpiece of the entire project, the Hall of State.



Enjoy learning the history of Art Deco, touring the art and architecture of Fair Park, and discovering some of the episodes from history that inspired the vision of Hall of State architect Donald Barthelme.

The Origins of Art Deco

The term *Art Deco* comes from the 1925 Paris Exhibition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (which translates to the “International Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts”). The exposition was dedicated to the display of modern decorative arts, exhibiting the work of thousands of designers from all over Europe. Several countries sponsored *pavilions*, decorative temporary buildings that housed exhibits showcasing the splendors of their national culture. The exposition attracted over 16 million visitors, marking the high point of the first phase of Art Deco.

*The Primavera Pavilion,
inspired by African thatched huts.*



The entrance to the Polish pavilion



The host city played a very large role in the exhibition. Following the devastation wrought by the Great War, Europe entered a rebuilding era, and France was determined to lead the way. Parisians had traditionally been trendsetters in fashion and the arts, and once again they sought to be the world leaders in style. The exhibition helped to establish the preeminence of French taste and luxury goods. French displays dominated the exhibition and Paris itself was put on show as the most fashionable of cities.



A postcard of Paris in 1925 showing the exposition buildings on the left bank of the Seine.

The exposition took over a huge portion of the city. Pavilions and avenues of boutiques spread across both sides of the river Seine, which runs through the center of Paris. Twelve monumental entrances led into the heart of the fair. By day, these sights and shops enticed visitors by the thousands. At night, the entire city came alive, truly earning its name, “The City of Lights.”

Even nations that did not participate in the Paris exposition soon began to take notice of the new style. Art Deco came to represent the Modern Age, and in an era of progress and technological innovation, people were enthusiastic about anything having to do with modernity.

The style was borne into American architecture with the skyscraper boom of the mid-1920s. Contests for the design of high-profile buildings like the Tribune Tower in Chicago and New York's Chrysler Building garnered public interest in Art Deco. These huge building projects attracted the attention of the world, pointing out how quickly the United States was able to recover from the War. After all, none of the battles had been fought on American soil, and the United States' industrial economy had benefited from the production of materials for the war.

Eager to show off their wealth and prosperity, as well as their good taste in the style of the French, American architects, designers, and city planners embraced Art Deco. However, by the end of the decade, the course of events would change and put the adaptability of the new style to the test.

Art Deco and the Great Depression

On a day known as Black Tuesday, October 29, 1929, the world witnessed the crash of the stock market and the beginning of the Great Depression. The worldwide economic decline created record-high levels of unemployment, homelessness, and poverty. The funding for private building and city beautification projects all but disappeared as people struggled just to put food on the table.



It was set within this grim landscape that Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected president in 1932. Promising a “New Deal” for the American people, FDR passed a series of laws creating public works projects that would employ thousands who were out of a job. The primary relief agency of the New Deal was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). By providing jobs instead of handouts, the Roosevelt administration oversaw the construction of many new buildings, roads, airports, and schools.



Travel poster in the early French Art Deco style



Art Deco design after "streamlining"

Following the Great Depression, Art Deco proved to be an adaptive style. Its practitioners no longer embellished their art and architecture with the florid details of the French-inspired decorative style; rather, this second phase of Art Deco underwent a treatment known as “streamlining.” Designs became angular and machine-like, forging a style that seemed both more modern and more appropriate to the sober times wrought by economic hardship.

The primary building materials of streamlined Art Deco—baked enamels, plastics, and aluminum—were cheap and abundant in the factory-based economy of the United States. Furthermore, because of its ensemble nature, Art Deco proved ideal for New Deal building projects. A single structure would employ architects, interior designers, muralists, and craftsmen, thus providing a vast array of jobs.



In spite of the Depression, astonishing changes were taking place in the fields of science and technology. Most people living at this time had been born into a world without electricity, some even without phones. Yet by 1939, Americans were introduced to transatlantic flights, intercontinental phone-calls, air conditioning, electric dishwashers, automobiles, and even televisions. Art Deco, both a visual expression and a celebration of progress, reflected America’s excitement for these innovations. Art Deco came to represent middle class consumer culture between the wars, marking the culmination of a period of intense industrial and social change.

Art Deco Comes to Dallas

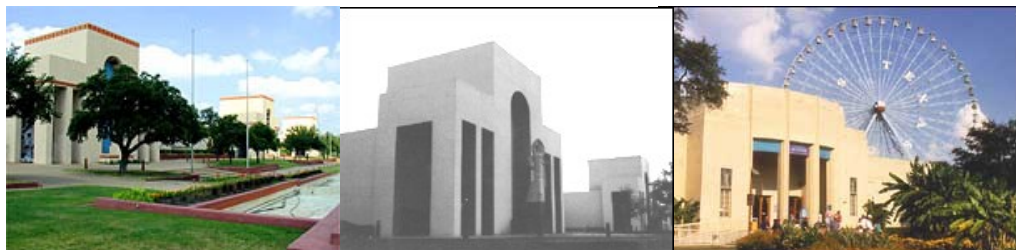
Just like the rest of the country, Dallas had to figure out how to recover from the Depression. One important opportunity arose in 1936, the 100th anniversary of Texas' independence from Mexico. Dallas competed with cities like Houston, Austin, and San Antonio to host the Centennial Exposition, which would bring private investment and tourism revenues to a city in need of economic relief. In the end, Dallas offered the largest bid and was chosen as the site of both the Centennial and the World's Fair of 1936, the first of its kind ever to be held in the Southwest United States.



Like their international predecessors, the World's Fairs that took place in the U.S. during the 1930s promoted business and prosperity. However, they were also intended to provide an antidote to economic gloom. They presented a distraction for the masses, a glimpse of the way ahead presented in a utopian and nationalistic package.

Hosting an event of this magnitude meant that Dallas needed to put on its finery and prove itself a world-class city, just as Paris had done in 1925. The first step was to spruce up its fairgrounds, which had been home to the Dallas State Fair since 1886. The City increased the land area of Fair Park to 180 acres and commissioned fifty new buildings for the event, twenty-one of which would be permanent. The entire project cost \$25 million and by June of 1936, a mere eight months after construction began, there stood an exposition site the size of an entire city.

Architect George Dahl declared that all of the exposition buildings would be done in the "contemporary style" and that each design had to receive his approval. As a result, the architecture of Fair Park is unified and adherent to the tradition of Art Deco, although that term was not popularized until the 1960s.



The Hall of State

At the very center of the building frenzy stood the magnificent shrine to Texas history, the Hall of State. Funded by a \$1.2 million grant from the state legislature, the Hall was the most expensive building of its day in all of Texas. Today the building houses the Dallas Historical Society and many circulating exhibits from its collections. Yet perhaps the most compelling feature of the Hall of State is the building itself, a wonderfully preserved original example of the architectural style that defined the age of progress.

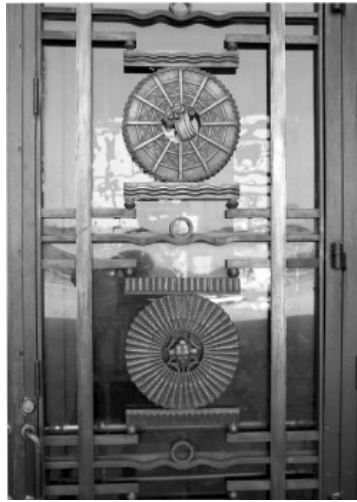


Art deco details abound from floor to ceiling the moment you encounter the Hall. Situated in its place of honor at the head of the Esplanade, the building is truly a feast for the eyes. The imposing central portico towers above as you approach. Grand pilasters of Texas limestone seventy-six feet high frame the bronze double doorways leading into the building.

This design reflects Art Deco's interest in celebrating native cultures and the iconography of non-Western art. The originators of Art Deco were initially inspired by the discovery of the pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, and the resulting surge of interest in Egyptian art. As the style developed, it incorporated African, Incan, Mayan, and other native and tribal forms into its visual vocabulary. The statue above the entrance is the figure of a Tejas warrior, a member of the Native American tribe for which Texas is named. The use of symbolism is common in Deco ornamentation, as we see at work in the building's entrance. The warrior's bow, upraised but without an arrow, symbolizes peace. The field of blue mosaic tile work behind him represents the flower of the state of Texas, the bluebonnet. Even the doors provide another level of meaning; in their intricate designs of cotton bolls, wheat sheaves, pine cones, saw blades, oil rigs, lariats, and livestock, they illustrate the industry and agriculture of Texas.



This detail of the bronze doors depicts one of the most famous icons of Texas industry, the oil derrick. The crossbeams of the structure, like the famous Lucas Gusher of the Spindletop oil field pictured here, are splayed out in a radial design. In the center is the swell of oil that would have burst from the earth upon its discovery.



Surrounding the top of the Hall of State is a decorative frieze. This band of carved (cut into the surface) and relief (three dimensional, protruding from the building) sculpture displays the names of famous early Texans. Along the front, the names are arranged so that the first letters spell out the name of the architect, *Barthelme*, except for the final "E." Beside each name is yet another decorative symbol of Texas flora, like the sunflowers and pinecones beside the name of Alamo hero James Butler Bonham .



more

deco



In the floor of the Great Hall, visitors find mosaic tile designs of Texas wildlife, like the horned frog pictured here (above).

The lights illuminating the floor of the majestic Great Hall are ornate *torchieres*. Their sleek, geometric design exemplifies the style of decorative arts that characterized Art Deco at its height.

These unique chandeliers in the South Texas Room, embellished with glittering squares of colored glass, give a futuristic feel to an otherwise traditional exhibit hall.

details

at the
Hall of State



Glossary

Centennial: a 100th anniversary

Preeminence: the state of being superior

Boutique: *French-* a small, fashionable specialty shop

Culmination: the highest point; climax

Antidote: remedy

Utopian: ideal; impossibly perfect

Esplanade: a level open stretch of paved ground

Portico: a covered porch, usually fronted with columns

Pilaster: a flattened, rectangular column

Radial: developing around a central axis, like rays

Frieze: a sculptured band, as on a building

Iconography: the traditional or conventional images or symbols associated with a subject