



The sofa in Ginie Courtauld's boudoir at Eltham Palace is an early example of built in furniture. It combines shelves and side table.



A bedroom at Eltham Palace shows built in shelves and furniture designed by Seely in laminated wood.



A 1925 writing desk by Sir Edward Maufe which can be seen at the V&A Art Deco Exhibition this summer. Courtesy Victoria and Albert Museum.



Replicas of the original black bean and walnut furniture designed by Rolf Engströmer in 1937 for Eltham Palace. The circular rug by Mamon Dorn is now at the V&A Museum. This replica can be seen at Eltham Palace.

Art Deco Furniture

by Zita Thornton

After the First World War new types of furniture reflected a new lifestyle. Cocktail cabinets were used for all the paraphernalia required to make jazz age cocktails. Elaborate dressing tables displayed perfume bottles and powder puffs. Furniture became decorative as well as functional with luxury woods, marble, mirrored glass and tubular steel. The more traditional craftsmanship sat alongside new, experimental techniques. The Art Deco style of decoration with influences from the Egyptian, Aztec and tribal African art, found its way on to furniture too.

The most extreme examples of this style came from France in the 1920s with the use of opulent materials such as ivory and mother of pearl and luxuriant upholstery from designers such as J.E. Ruhlmann, Jules Leleu and Jean Dunand. This extravagant style peaked in the mid twenties and developed into a modernist style led by Le Corbusier. In Britain, with the notable exception of designers such as Jack Pritchard and his Isokon Furniture Company,

John C Rogers and the Russian born Chermayeff, British designers favoured simple form with the emphasis on craftsmanship. They used pale woods, such as sycamore or walnut, using the grain of the wood itself as decoration, or traditional oak such as the pieces by Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson, who got his nickname by the trademark figure of a mouse he carved onto his pieces.

Many pieces were especially commissioned for large, spacious rooms and were often built in to the room itself. Betty Joel was well known for this type of furniture. Her designs were commissioned for bedrooms and boardrooms and then copied at a more modest price by other manufacturers. Companies such as Heal & Son offered the avant garde alongside the traditional. Decoration was kept to a minimum and practicality was at the forefront with furniture which combined multiple usage, such as a chair with an attached side table or shelves.



Cloud back Art Deco dining suite and lounge suite upholstered in leather to be auctioned at Sotheby's in May.



In other parts of Europe the French modernist style influenced furniture design. The Bauhaus designers of Germany developed the first cantilevered tubular metal chair. Others such as Bruno Paul crafted custom made furniture in a severe style which showed off beautiful veneer patterns. In the Netherlands, the de Stijl group offered furniture which reflected the primary colours and angular designs of the group's leaders Piet Mondrian and van Doesburg. Scandinavian style was influenced by the most avant garde of the Bauhaus. Furniture was geometric in shape with minimal decoration. It was functional, practical, flexible, especially the pieces which came from Sweden. The Danes combined practicality with economy. The Finnish Alvar Aalto produced the classic piece of modernist furniture in 1929 with his Scroll armchair, its seat and arms fashioned from laminated bentwood, which gave a look of tubular steel in the more elegant wood.

In America, the French modernist style was not so popular, despite a nationwide tour in the late twenties. It was too exuberant for the Americans who preferred the Northern European, machine made, mass produced look. In 1930, Paul Frankl declared all ornament to be a crime. He and others, produced 'Skyscraper' furniture, inspired by the tall, new buildings of New York, furniture which would easily have fitted into the Chrysler building or radio City.

Architect Frank Lloyd Wright produced inviting furniture which combined metal and wood. Both materials were popular with the Americans for whom metal was as welcome as wood. The latter were veneered in the contrasting colours of native woods such as burr maple, holly and fir. By the mid-thirties metal became the favourite until the introduction of altogether new materials such as Formica and Lucite.

Market information

The best Art Deco furniture by the top designers was always highly priced, reflecting quality of materials and craftsmanship. Much was especially commissioned by wealthy clients. However, most Art Deco furniture available today is, by less distinguished designers and the price is more affordable. Bedroom suites of wardrobe, dressing table and stool are an ideal way of introducing Art Deco style into the home at £1,000-£3,000. Light woods are the most desirable. A dining suite of table and set of chairs would cost between £2,000-£8,000. Sideboards and occasional tables would give you the style for less than £500. Lounge suites of sofa and chairs often have worn upholstery but one in good condition would be £1,000-£2,000.

Cocktail cabinets are evocative of the time. Prices go on size, elaboration, accessories and whether they illuminate on opening. Prices range from £1,000 to ten times that for an elaborate example. Sotheby's next sale to include Art Deco furniture will be the Fine Decorative Arts and Design sale in May.



Art Deco ebonised and satinwood dressing table and stool sold at Sotheby's last year (May 2002) for £1,527. (Price includes buyer's premium)



French dressing table (1925) designed by Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann. Courtesy of DACS, London.



An Art Deco burr maple coffee table with four pull out occasional tables sold at Sotheby's, May 2002 for £2,702. (Price includes buyer's premium)



An Art Deco walnut cocktail cabinet c1930. The upper door drops down to reveal a fitted sliding interior with cocktail accessories. Glazed cupboard side doors enclose glass shelves. Sold at Sotheby's May 2002. £470.

Art Deco at Eltham Palace

One of the best places to see lavish interiors by leading Art Deco designers is at Eltham Palace. The house was built in the nineteen thirties for the Courtaulds as an opulent setting for their collection of art and furniture. Wood panelled rooms with marble and metal features, were designed as a backdrop to built in and free standing furniture. Veneered marquetry and block printed wallpaper provided stunning mural backdrops to tub chairs by Swedish designer Engstromer and integral laminated wood bedroom suites by Seely. Built in cupboards with glass shelves and mirror backs once housed Persian and Chinese pottery. The house included much modern technology including a centralised vacuum cleaning system, electric appliances in the kitchen, gas central heating, an internal telephone system and a loudspeaker system which could broadcast music throughout the house.

Eltham Palace is at Court Yard, Eltham SE9. Open 10am-4pm in the winter, and until 6pm in the summer.

Art Deco Exhibition (see pages 40 & 41)

The Art Deco Exhibition currently running at the *Victoria and Albert Museum* until July 20th explores the development of the style before the war, its highpoint at the Paris exhibition of 1925 and its subsequent spread around the world. One of the highlights is the display of the 1930s entrance foyer from the Strand Palace Hotel saved from destruction nearly 25 years ago and stored at the V&A. Tickets cost £8 adults, £5 concessions, Free for under 18s and the disabled.

Four new books accompany the Exhibition. These are reviewed in our Book Review pages near the back of the magazine. *Art Deco 1910-1939* Editors - Tim Benton, Charlotte Benton and Ghislaine Wood. £40 hardback. *Art Deco Fashion* by Suzanne Lussier. £12.95 hardback. *Art Deco Textiles* by Charlotte Samuels. £30 hardback. *Essential Art Deco* by Ghislaine Wood. £12.95 hardback.