

Dark Deco

- by Michael A. Aquino

PART I: DARK DECO

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Order of the Trapezoid, Temple of Set

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The current interest in Art Deco often tends to be explained as an offshoot of the general fascination with 20th-century nostalgia-art. The style's characteristic features have been explained by Bevis Hillier (in *The World of Art Deco*) as influences from Egyptian and pre-Columbian architecture; an emphasis on straight lines, tight curves, and sharp angles; and a fascination with speed and streamlining associated with the dawning machine age.

What is not so clear is why this particular type of art should exercise the allure that it does. Art Deco is never regarded with ambivalence; people are either obsessed with it or repelled by it. Since the reasons for its powerful effect are obscure, Art Deco always has something of the mysterious about it. It suggests that there are geometric and curvilinear forces at work which humans cannot quite understand, but which somehow have been captured and frozen in a particular piece of sculpture, furniture, or architecture. As with gravity or magnetism, the viewer cannot see the thing itself; he must be content with a glimpse of its "trail" in the material world. Hence one's interest in collecting Art Deco derives at least in part from a desire to assert mastery over the unknown. If it cannot be explained, then at least it can be controlled or possessed.

It is perhaps not surprising that Art Deco came into being during the heyday of Expressionism, another "mysterious" art form. If the most shocking Expressionist statements came from Weimar Germany, the difference between them and the more subtle impact of Art Deco might be explained by the greater French and American cultural influence in the latter. Yet both shared a common theme: the reduction of objects, shapes, and features to an "expression" of their essence - what Plato referred to as a "Form" or "First Principle". Expressionist art and Art Deco are thus aesthetically satisfying because they appear to lay bare the controlling forces beneath and behind superficial images; they show the thing as it "really is", not as it appears to be after being laden with peripheral decorations.

Art, goes the old cliché, is in the eyes of the beholder. One might amend this to suggest that a work of art has no significance in itself; its power lies rather in the emotions, sensations, and revelations it evokes in the consciousness of each observer. Thus art is a trigger, a stimulus to the soul. It affirms something not about itself or even its ostensible subject, but rather about the *psyche* of the artist - and the observer.

Hence the Art Deco enthusiast, like the devotee of Expressionism, is by that interest making a statement about the nature of his or her soul. He or she is impatient with surface images, bored with frippery, and drawn by the weird and the outré. Art Deco portrays the human being as one secretly wishes to be: a kind of *Metropolis* robot[rix] with a dispassionate, cool, and cruel disposition. Art Deco is never warm, cozy, reassuring; it is

glacial and impersonal. Those fearful of, dissatisfied with, or contemptuous of human emotions seek in Art Deco a mirror which will show them - and reinforce in them - only the non-human aspects of their souls.

Consider by way of illustration two well-known works of cinema art: Edgar Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934) and Robert Fuest's two *Dr. Phibes* films (1971 & 1972).

Ulmer, who had won his director's spurs as an assistant to the great Expressionist director F.W. Murnau (*Nosferatu* and *Faust*), created a story of sexual obsession and Satanism in which only the two key antagonists - Hjalmar Poelzig (Boris Karloff) and Vitus Werdegast (Bela Lugosi) - truly comprehend the nature both of one another and of the conflict between them. The young hero and heroine - a conspicuously naive American couple - are able to sense only that Poelzig is bad news and should be escaped from. Despite Werdegast's efforts to help them, they mistrust him too - since he seems only slightly less menacing than Poelzig.

Of particular interest is the emphatic and overwhelming Art Deco atmosphere of Poelzig's home. Built atop the ruins of Fortress Marmoros, site of World War I slaughter and "the greatest graveyard in the world", it exudes a sterile chill of modernity, accented by the Deco's seeming mockery of the steel and concrete catacombs of the underlying fortress. Hidden within those ruins are the bodies of many beautiful women, suspended in Deco glass capsules by Poelzig; and deeper still lies his secret Satanic chapel. Therein eventually occurs one of the most graphic Black Masses ever portrayed on the screen [regrettably edited in most of the versions shown on television]. Again Art Deco dominates the chamber, with an abstract double-cross surrounded by four stark, burnished-metal obelisks and an altar-sculpture consisting of a starburst of metal triangles. Upon the chapel's floor is a giant five-pointed star, whose shocking contrasts of black and white inspire the same terror in the viewer as do the Expressionist shafts of light in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*'s famous prison-cell scene.

The Art Deco element in *The Black Cat*, therefore, is a deliberate device to generate fear - to shatter any reassurance the audience might derive from familiar surroundings. Unlike the totally fantastic and distorted sets of *Caligari* and *Der Golem*, the world of *The Black Cat* lies within the realm of the believable because its Deco atmosphere could in fact exist. The film's artistic strength derives substantially from its statement that Art Deco inspires and enhances much the same sort of audience disorientation as did the earlier Expressionist sets. Karloff and Lugosi are the icing on a cake that is already very sinister indeed.

In *The Abominable Dr. Phibes* and *Dr. Phibes Rises Again* Robert Fuest surrounded his outrageously artistic villain (Vincent Price) with a phantasmagoria of Art Deco interiors and artifacts, to include a dance-band of full-size clockwork robots.* Phibes' succession of gruesome murders is accompanied by period music as well - "Charmaine", "Darktown Strutters Ball", "Over the Rainbow" - and the mad doctor makes his dramatic entrances and exits on an elevating concert organ (with Deco pipes of illuminated crimson glass) to the tune of Mendelssohn's "War March of the Priests".

In the *Phibes* films, as in *The Black Cat*, one is stunned by how singularly supportive the Art Deco is to the desired climate of horror and the supernatural. Price is inevitably a more tongue-in-cheek rogue than Karloff or Lugosi, but the Deco is just as effective in Phibes' London mansion and Egyptian tomb-lair as it is at Marmoros. Poelzig's necrophilia is echoed by Phibes, who safeguards the body of his dead wife against a time when she may be revived. Until then Victoria Phibes enjoys a succession of Deco sarcophagi, including a mirrored vault beneath a sundial, a neon-lit juke box, and an Art Nouveau canopy of glass shaped like a Rolls-Royce radiator and topped with two RR

flying-lady ornaments.

All this is hardly to suggest that Art Deco enthusiasts are frustrated murderers, sadists, or necrophiliacs. The style has its uplifting aspects as well. But perhaps our brief venture into the darker side of Deco has provided food for thought concerning lesser-known elements of its unique - and elusive - psychology.

PART II: DARK DECO II: HOUSE ON HAUNTED HILL

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Without knowing what futurism is like, Johansen achieved something very close to it when he spoke of the nightmare corpse-city of R'lyeh, that was built in measureless aeons behind history by the loathsome shapes that seeped down from the dark stars. Instead of describing any definite structure or building, he dwells only on the broad impressions of vast angles and stone surfaces - surfaces too great to belong to anything right or proper for this Earth, and impious with horrible images and hieroglyphs ... Twisted menace and suspense lurked leeringly in those crazily elusive angles of carven rock where a second glance showed concavity after the first showed convexity.

- H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*

Searchers after Dark Deco need not travel to R'lyeh (actually located on the Micronesian isle of Ponape and referred to as Nan Madol on conventional maps) to sample the Cyclopean architecture of the Great Old Ones. As you drive through the fashionable Los Feliz area of Hollywood, a glance up towards Griffith Park reveals - perched starkly on an isolated crag - what appears to be an ancient Mayan temple. A second glance belies this; its shape is too irregular and its atmosphere too sybaritic for any ordinary religious shrine. Although its dramatic presence dominates the hills and surrounding valley, few of the local residents can - or will - say much about it. One must prowl the pleasantly sordid little bookstores along Hollywood Boulevard in order to locate a faded *Necronomicon* setting forth the history of the structure; even then one receives suspicious looks from the furtive booksellers, clearly implying that no respectable antiquarian would presume to concern himself with such outre matters.

The edifice at 2655 Glendower Avenue, one learns, was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1924 as a residence for Mr. & Mrs. Charles Ennis.

"Wright had been putting the finishing touches on it," commented Anton LaVey in X/1975, "when his houseboy went berserk at Taliesen and killed seven people. It was said the house was cursed. He built it for a shoe magnate, and the man lost everything in the Depression. The next owner's wife jumped off the parapet."

After 44 years and 6 owners, the house was acquired by a Mr. G. Oliver Brown. In 1980 he donated it to the Trust for Preservation of Cultural Heritage, which has undertaken its preservation and restoration. Since the publication of "Dark Deco" in its *Sophisticate*, the Art Deco Society of California has been after me for more of the same. This seemed as good a reason as any for an archaeological expedition to HHH this past September.

In 1934 the Ennis House made its film debut in *The Black Cat*, inspiring the chillingly beautiful residence of Boris Karloff, the Satanist who preserved his paramours in glass Deco showcases. For years thereafter the house was rumored to be Karloff's in actuality, and many a teenaged boy dared a nocturnal trespass over the wall hoping, no doubt, for a glimpse of nameless rites & unspeakable orgies within.

In 1958, presumably in an effort to improve its image, the House starred again as the *House on Haunted Hill*, wherein a gloating Vincent Price lures guests into vats of acid and such. In a decadent detour it served as the residence of art director Claude Estee in the film version of Nathaniel West's *Day of the Locust*, and entered science fiction in *Terminal Man*. Most recently it was chosen as the site for Harrison Ford's residence in *Blade Runner* - with an amusing twist as noted below. If you have managed to miss all of the above [shame on you!], you may catch it once more in *Howling II*, wherein it is overrun with slavering werewolves.

Frank Lloyd Wright, we are told, did not do Deco - or Mayan - or Moderne - but [ahem!] **Frank Lloyd Wright**. If the Ennis house looks Mayan/Deco, it is thus purely coincidental. As was his practice at the time, Wright created a unique, geometrically-decorated 16" concrete block to be used within and without the building. Each block is reinforced by steel rods embedded in the concrete. This sounds like a nice idea, but when it rained the steel became wet and expanded, with the result that many of the blocks are disintegrating [and the roof leaks]. In the interests of authenticity the Trust has not stooped to the manufacture of new blocks, but when more were needed for a *Blade Runner* set, Hollywood cranked out a batch of fakes. Upon completion of filming these were donated to the Trust, which used them to build a Frank Lloyd Wright dog house for the Dobermans who escort trespassing teenagers briskly off the premises.

The entrance-hall with its stern stone symmetry, 6' ceiling, and subdued lighting, does not exactly dispel the notion that one is entering a pre-Columbian tomb. We were informed by the Trust docent that Wright intended the ceiling to reflect the height of the inhabitants. Since the ceiling jumps to 22' shortly thereafter, one can't help wondering at the odd dimensions of said inhabitants. Happily no 22' denizen appeared, though one of the Dobermans [at least I hope it was only a Doberman!] sent a mournful howl echoing through the passageways at about the time we reached the main hall.

If you are into geometric concrete blocks, you would be very happy here, as they are everywhere. In fact the basic difference between the inside and the outside of the house is that the inside is on the inside and the outside is on the outside. Wright wanted slate floors, but Ennis put his foot down [sorry!] and had white marble installed instead, which we were told went better with Hollywood bacchanalia of the 1920s. Wright also wanted a dark, rugged wood for the main ceilings; Ennis opted for a beautifully-finished teak. A later owner added a [Mayan/Deco?] swimming pool to the outside patio, from which - if you look out across the Hollywood Hills - you can see a large white Richard Neutra mansion glaring back at the House on Haunted Hill like Siegfried confronting Fafnir.

Even assuming that the Trust docent didn't show us the room where Boris K. preserved his ladies, HHH is surprisingly small in terms of living space. Count: living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms w/bath, and den. Wright expected southern California to be warm & sunny all the time, so there are just two small fireplaces which, considering all the concrete and glass around, ain't 'nuff. One begins to understand why the place has changed owners so frequently: Despite its undeniable beauty and drama, cozy it isn't. Dazzling guests is all well and good, but you also want to be able to raid the fridge in the middle of the night without barking your shins on Deco concrete, donning a coat, or taking a pratfall on the marble.

The Ennis house is occasionally confused with another house not too far away - the Ramon Novarro house built in 1928 by Lloyd Wright, son of Frank L.W., at 5699 Valley Oak Drive.

This dramatic mansion of pale concrete and hammered bronze trim was originally decorated by MGM set designer Frank Gibbons entirely in black fur and silver, and Novarro's dinner guests were expected to complement same by wearing only black/white/silver attire. [Novarro later moved to a simple ranch-style house at 3110 Laurel Canyon where, as Kenneth Anger recounts, "his ghastly death by beating in 1968 brought to mind the bizarre crimes of Hollywood's past. Here was a man dying, as he had lived, extravagantly, choked in his own blood - the lead Art Deco dildo which Valentino had given him 45 years earlier thrust down his throat."

Tours of the Novarro house are not conducted, as it remains a private residence. Tours of the Ennis house are no longer conducted as of 2009, as the property is presently up for sale: <http://www.ennishouse.org/> Be careful not to step in the big vat with the bubbling stuff in it.

* COMMENT:

April 27, 2006

My Dear Michael,

Enjoyed your article. However, as amusing as it was to hear you waxing lyrically at length about the significance of the decor, all much appreciated I might say, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that this was a low-budget project designed as a vehicle for Vincent Price who, contract-wise, owed AIP three movies.

Bob Fuest (ex Art Director of note) and myself sat down over a few bottles of wine and tried to write some sense into what was then an appalling outline. Our motivation? Keep it light and tongue-in-cheek.

As a young designer in the industry (this was my third or fourth film), I happened to have a passing interest in Art Nouveau/Deco at the time and a reasonable supply of reference materials to hand in my library. It all just happened, so there.

My best wishes to you.

Brian Eatwell

Production Designer

Los Angeles