

Blackwell's Almanac

A Publication of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society



The Chrysler Building at 405 Lexington Avenue. Created by William Van Alen, it is considered Manhattan's "Deco monument." See "New York City's Art Deco Era—with Anthony W. Robins," p. 2. Photo credit: Randy Juster.

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Blackwell's Almanac

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New York City's Art Deco Era— with Anthony W. Robins by Melanie C. Colter

After the Paris World's Fair of 1925, Art Deco and Style Moderne principles spread rapidly across the globe. Between 1923 and 1932, Art Deco transformed the New York City skyline into its present iconic spectacle, thrusting our city into the modern era.

Anthony W. Robins is a 20-year veteran of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, and has worked extensively with the Art Deco Society of New York to bring New York's modern architectural legacy to the attention of city dwellers and visitors alike. In December, as a part of the Roosevelt Island Historical Society's public lecture series, Robins discussed the origins of the Art Deco style and gave an overview of some of New York's finest Deco buildings.

We encourage you to discover more of our city's Art Deco period with Robins' recent book, New York Art Deco: A Guide to Gotham's Jazz Age Architecture, (SUNY Press, Excelsior Editions, 2017), which features fifteen thoughtful, self-guided walking tours (available at the Roosevelt Island Visitor Center Kiosk).

For nearly a century, according to speaker Anthony Robins, extravagant and formally intricate Victorian architecture ruled. Queen Anne and Gothic Revival, among the more popular Victorian styles, could be seen everywhere from New England to the reaches of Southern California, from New York City's residential buildings to its corporate office headquarters, and everything in between.

Then, in the 1920s and '30s, contemporary French aesthetics began to influence mainstream American art and architecture. In New York City, rapid population growth meant adding density to the city's housing, manufacturing, and office developments. The first and most enduring use of Art Deco design in the city was in the pioneering skyscrapers that began to define the Midtown skyline. Later, in the '30s, during the Great Depression, it branched into the growing neighborhoods of Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx.

What Is Art Deco?

According to Robins, "Art Deco" (short for "Arts Décoratifs") is the fashionable name for all the various modernistic architectural styles current between the two World Wars. It was formalized into a stylistic term by museum curators

during a 1966 retrospective exhibition in Paris. It particularly celebrated the French “Style Moderne” (or simply “Moderne”) and Decorative Arts designs on display at the highly-influential Paris World’s Fair of 1925.



A multicolor display of lines, geometric shapes and graphic symbols adorns Ely Jacques Kahn’s Two Park Avenue. Photo credit: Randy Juster.

The term generally refers to a futuristic, horizontal, streamlined form and ornamentation. This could take the form of floral patterns, geometric shapes, directional lines and graphic symbols. It could

also be murals and motifs that commonly dressed up entryways and lobbies. Or it might be symbolic imagery that created a graphic story or established a quasi-logo for company branding. As Robins states in his book: Art Deco’s range and elusive qualities mean that “its substance is sometimes hard to pin down...It is flowery and it is zigzag; it is intimate and it is monolithic; it is abstract and it is figurative; it is Roaring Twenties extravagant and it is Depression-era cheap.”

The increasing prevalence of synthetic building materials in the early 20th century helped enhance these decorative elements. Polychrome, glazed terra cotta and rustproof metallics including Nirosta (an alloy of nickel, chrome and steel) and Monel allowed for colorful displays that became the hallmark of the Art Deco style. They also helped evoke a sense of luxury; in an era of frugal budgets, their multicolor dazzle made the most ordinary building appear more extravagant.

And yet, this list is not complete. There is one more seminal characteristic that became synonymous with New York’s Art Deco heritage, the speaker noted: the sense of verticality that began to emerge in its jazz-

age construction. Several preceding influences fused this connection.

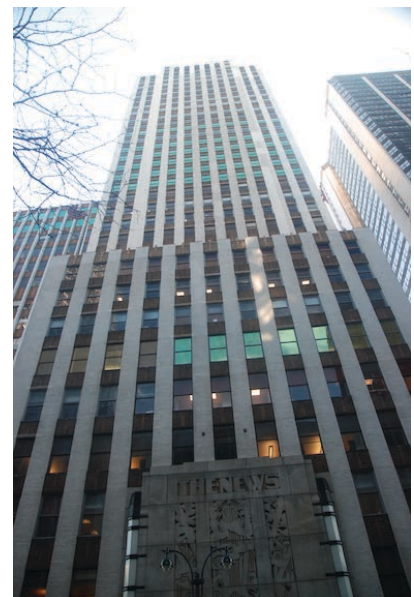
Origins of the Deco Skyscraper

New York was the first city in the United States to introduce a zoning ordinance (1916) that regulated the size and bulk of individual buildings. To comply with air and light requirements, architects experimented with these design constraints, trading setbacks for building height. These translated into the upward-reaching steps and cubes that distinguished the city’s Art Deco skyscrapers, unseen before in any American metropolis.

Another formidable influence was Louis Sullivan’s mid-19th century Chicago architecture design. Sullivan, “the father of skyscrapers,” had worked to accentuate vertical movement in his buildings. The “vertical style,” as it was commonly referred to by architects of the Art Deco era, was accomplished by both material contrast and stacked window placement. Sullivan created a soaring line of stacked window bays, contrasted with alternating vertical stretches of colorful building cladding such as brick, metal, or terra cotta. This verticality soon found its way to New York.

The City’s “Deco Pioneers”

By the 1920s, early skyscrapers already lined the streets of the downtown financial district, but had not yet come to midtown. Between 1923 and 1932, Art Deco towers added to the downtown skyline, but



The Daily News Building by Raymond Hood. Notice the splashes of color and the stark, vertical window lines. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

created a brand-new skyline in midtown. “Four pioneers,” as the speaker called them, conceived of New York’s new, Art Deco skyscraper designs.

Raymond Hood, one of the most influential architects of his day, was already renowned for winning the highly-publicized 1922 skyscraper design competition for the Chicago Tribune building. In 1929, he began work on the Daily News Building (see p. 3), located at 220 East 42nd Street in Midtown.

Hood was known for criticizing New York’s architecture as being “fake.” “This referred to the two-dimensional quality of the design of row houses,” Robins explained. Cast-iron façades and stone-faced entries masked the true forms and materials of existing buildings. But the News Building’s two principle façades—each with a different and distinct profile—made especially visible by an alley on the west side accentuated its three-dimensional form. Its ornamentation, comprised of vertical stripes, is achieved with vertically stacked, recessed windows flanked by contrasting vertical stacks of white brick.

Another of Hood’s legacies is the American Radiator Building, built for the American Radiator Company in 1924, at 40 West 40th Street. Robins noted that it is the first use of black and gold on a New York skyscraper and features a modernistic interpretation of

Gothic details. The building has been reincarnated after several years of vacancy as the Bryant Park Hotel. Hood later designed the McGraw Hill and RCA buildings in Midtown Manhattan.

Ralph Walker, another of New York’s most celebrated architects, designed a series of telephone company buildings that utilize the Deco ornament and “pictorial schemes illustrating some facet of telecommunications,” Robins explains in his book. Among the more notable is Walker’s marriage of Gothic and Art Deco in what was the Irving Trust Company building, located at 1 Wall Street in lower Manhattan.

According to Robins, “Walker and Hood developed the [Art Deco] style,” but “Van Alen created its best-known icon.” William Van Alen produced the Chrysler building (405 Lexington Avenue) (see p. 1), Manhattan’s “Deco monument.” Though his architectural career was short-lived due to his pursuit of other endeavors, “the Ziegfeld of architecture,” as he was referred to, mastered the transfer of corporate iconography into the built form. This was exemplified by the enormous version of the winged hood ornament of a 1929 Chrysler incorporated half-way up the tower.

The final of the four “pioneers” was **Ely Jacques Kahn**. Kahn’s first Art Deco design,

known as Two Park Avenue (between 32nd and 33rd Streets) (see p. 3), fused Gothic revival elements with a



Raymond Hood’s American Radiator Building (now the Bryant Park Hotel), was the first New York skyscraper to use black and gold. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.



Gothic tracery interpreted in a Deco window design is a distinctive feature of the former Irving Trust Building. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.



Howells’ Panhellenic House, now called the Beekman Tower, embodies the recessed, vertical stacks of windows and setbacks typical of the period’s skyscrapers. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

modernistic interpretation that employs colorful terra cotta ornament. Much of Kahn's work was concentrated in the Garment District of Manhattan, which still hosts a multitude of his manufacturing buildings.

Some Other Skyline Notables

Many other architects worked contemporaneously with these "starchitects," producing a modern city profile that seemed to emerge almost overnight.

The Panhellenic House (see p. 4), now called the Beekman Tower, is located at 3 Mitchell Place in Midtown. It was built by John Mead Howells as a residence for women college graduates that opened in 1928, and served as a gateway between college education and professional opportunities for women. The building is a simplified geometric form of monotone brick with "chamfered" or beveled corners. Robins noted its departure from the Neo-Gothic features found on earlier Deco

buildings in Manhattan. However, the recessed, vertical stacks of windows and symmetrical setbacks toward its central tower perpetuate the modern skyscraper quality forged by its predecessors.

The Empire State Building, at 350 Fifth Avenue, was produced by Shreve, Lamb, and Harmon in 1929–31. Ironically, Lamb, the principal designer, did not fancy the Art Deco style but was influenced by his close colleague, Raymond Hood, according to Robins. The design did not initially include the antenna or the colored lights that glow on the tower at

night; these were added later, to the architect's alleged dismay. The vertical window placements are, of course, a nod to Deco. The cylindrical dirigible mooring mast, atop the tower, employs nickel-chrome-steel, a common material finish found on Deco buildings.

Encompassing three city blocks (48th to 51st Streets) in the heart of Fifth Avenue's commercial mecca, Rockefeller Center was designed by the Associated Architects in 1932. The Associated group included Raymond Hood, Harvey Wiley Corbett, and Wallace K. Harrison. The site includes Hood's RCA building, which is a 70-story tower that stands at 30 Rockefeller Plaza.

Although the complex's rich history transcends any single lecture on the Deco subject, it is of a stylistic piece with its brethren. The interior decor, in particular, depicts allegory-like imagery and symbolism with much thought, collaboration and purpose. We can see homages to the Art Deco style in its colorful, geometric elements, as well as in the vertical window columns and tapered setbacks.

The Century Apartments and Majestic Apartments on Central Park West demonstrate the architectural prowess of Irwin Chanin. According to Robins, Chanin's



Initially, the Empire State Building did not include the antenna. The cylindrical structure below the antenna is the dirigible mooring mast. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.



Part of the Rockefeller Center complex, Hood's soaring RCA Building (briefly the General Electric Building and now the Comcast Building) is familiar for its tapered setbacks and vertical window lines. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

designs were some of the first to employ the Deco ornament on large residential complexes. Chanin had spent a month studying the displays at the 1925 Exposition in Paris, which he consciously interpreted into a practical American aesthetic.

Deco Gems of the Outer Boroughs

Art Deco's spread across the boroughs began some years after "the pioneers" as it caught on with other architects. Its use expanded to a growing variety of construction, including modest housing complexes, theaters, hotels, night clubs, diners and bus and airport terminals. It was subsequently carried across the country through the work of artists and architects, notably in Federal Works Progress Administration projects.

Bronx: The Bronx was among the first of the boroughs to experience the spread of Art Deco architecture outside of Manhattan. Robins reminds us that, given its tremendous population growth, reaching over one million by 1930, these developments were often housing-related.

The apartment house at 888 Grand Concourse, located at East 161st Street, was designed by Emery Roth. It features an unorthodox "S" curve with streamlined corners at the corner of the



The Century Apartments by Irwin Chanin. Note the unique use of curtain wall windows and recessed openings. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

intersection. The curves continue throughout the design of the entry, and embody a harmony of black granite, bronze, and stainless steel. The streamlined architecture adopted in this building was a later interpretation of the modern aesthetic. The use of color evokes a Deco influence.

Queens: Jamaica's Kurtz Brothers Department Store, located on the commercial strip of Jamaica Avenue, employs the vertical style of Manhattan buildings, but on a much smaller scale. Robins notes the owners' consciousness of the elevated subway on Jamaica Avenue; he describes their desire for an "up-

to-the-minute modern structure that would catch the eye" of passing subway passengers using "modern and colorful design." It is another example of the use of Art Deco as advertisement, the speaker notes. The building was produced by Allmendinger and Schlendorf in 1931, and operated as one of four Kurtz Brothers Furniture Stores until 1978.



Emery Roth's 888 Grand Concourse with a head-on view of its unorthodox "S" curve. Photo credit: Randy Juster.



The Kurtz Bros. store on Jamaica Avenue depicts an Art Deco skyscraper silhouette in black and white on the building façade. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

In Astoria, the curious and rare example of Deco incorporated in a religious center is found at 32-23 36th Street. The fact that an architect devoted to academia helped design the Church of the Most Precious Blood is even more surprising. Talbot Hamlin, a Pulitzer Prize winner and a Columbia University School of Architecture celebrity, worked with Henry McGill, who had a long history designing churches in nearby boroughs and cities.

While the form of the church itself evokes Medieval design references, up close, the details of the arched entry, geometric details, and mosaic murals reveal the Deco signature. It was considered in its day a herald of modern church design.



Against its medieval design references (top), details of the Church of the Most Precious Blood's arched entry, geometric forms and mosaic murals (detail below) evoke its Art Deco influence. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

Brooklyn: The National Title Guaranty Company building, located at 185 Montague Street in the heart of Brooklyn Heights' former banking district, was designed by the highly-influential Manhattan firm, Corbett,

Harrison and MacMurray in 1929–30. This grand skyscraper's reference to Deco is present in the gradual setbacks that taper toward the central tower, as well as the vertical window placement. However, Robins explains, its more apparent nod to the style is present in the tile detail located in the lower stories.

Robins' lecture was a tantalizing taste of the Art Deco subject that inevitably led me to his book. And while the written work does not aim to be fully comprehensive, it has created a significant record of New York City's known and treasured Art Deco buildings—the architectural heritage of the city's dawning modern age.



Brooklyn's National Title Guaranty Building emulates the vertical window placement and setbacks of its Manhattan predecessors. Its distinctive tile detail is not visible in this image. Photo credit: Anthony Robins.

Source:

New York Art Deco: A Guide to Gotham's Jazz Age Architecture, by Anthony W. Robins (SUNY Press, Excelsior Editions, 2017). Photos by Anthony Robins and Randy Juster reproduced with their permission. For more of Randy Juster's Art Deco photos, from all over the world, please visit his web site: www.decopix.com; for more about Anthony Robins, please visit his web site: www.AnthonyWRobins.com

R.I. Inspires the Visual Arts: Edward Hopper's *Blackwell's Island*

If you live in New York and are the least bit interested in art, you cannot help but be engaged by the work of Edward Hopper. His two most famous paintings, *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) and *Nighthawks* (1942), embody the dark solitude of an anonymous city (even when depicting groups of people) for which he is known. *Blackwell's Island*, too, despite its bright blue water, or perhaps in counterpoint to it, exudes an air of forbidding isolation.



"Blackwell's Island." Image credit: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

contemporaries, who imitated the Impressionists and the more abstract Cubists, Hopper was attracted to realistic art.

Returning to New York, he began defining his own style, painting urban and architectural scenes in a dark palette. Stripping away almost all signs of life or action, and adding the harsh contrast of light and shadow, Hopper imbued his works with an existential melancholy and disconnection.

Painted in 1928, *Blackwell's Island* could be said to combine two of his favorite subjects: cityscapes, of course; in addition, his childhood home near the Hudson River and later excursions to New England inspired him to paint seascapes and nautical subjects. In this large-scale tableau (almost 3 feet x 5 feet), the blue-gray sky above and the intense blue water below are divided by a shadowed, menacing skyline. The subject matter is remote from the viewer and, except for a barely perceptible figure in the departing boat, largely lifeless. It is a quintessential Hopper work done at the height of his powers.

Despite our current view of Hopper as a modern master, he struggled for many years, forced to make his living doing commercial illustration, before "catching on." Ultimately the art world began to take note. In the early 1920s, he not only won several awards, six of his paintings were admitted to an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, and one of them, *Mansard Roof* (1923), was purchased by the museum for its permanent collection. By the early '30s, major museums such as the Whitney and the Metropolitan Museum of Art



"Early Sunday Morning." Image credit: <https://en.wikipedia.org>



"Nighthawks." Image credit: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

were paying thousands of dollars for his works and the Museum of Modern Art gave him his first large-scale retrospective.

The artist's legacy is uncontested. The word "Hopperesque" has entered the language to describe the moody and the dark. His imagery has influenced scores of visual artists, turning up even in film. For example, Hopper's use of light and shadow to create mood and symbolism can also be found in the cinematography of *film noir*. The 1981 film *Pennies from Heaven* features a scene that recreates *Nighthawks*. And, probably most widely seen by the public at large, his poignant *House by the Railroad* (1925), depicting an isolated Victorian mansion, was the inspiration for Alfred Hitchcock's Bates' house in *Psycho* (1960).

So many of Hopper's works are, today, in museums or dynastic collections, they don't often come up for public purchase. However,

amid great fanfare, *Blackwell's Island* was sold at auction by Christie's in 2013; it

commanded the considerable sum of \$19.2 million and now resides at the Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas.



"House by the Railroad." Image credit: <https://en.wikipedia.org>

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Announcing The Roosevelt Island Historical Society 40th Anniversary Raffle

Help us fund the many services and activities we provide and possibly win some great prizes at the same time. For just \$10 a ticket or \$25 for a book of three tickets, you could snag a piece of fine jewelry, ballet tickets, tickets to Yankee Stadium, theater membership, restaurant or liquor store gift certificates, and more. Look for our packet of raffle materials in your snail-mail-box sometime this spring. Or pick up a packet at the Visitor Center.

To be added to the Blackwell's Almanac mailing list, email request to:
rooseveltislandhistory@gmail.com

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Metropolitan Doctor Part 4

By now you are familiar with the story of Dr. Gloria O. Schrager, whose pursuit of a career in medicine was as unlikely a choice as could be imagined. Despite many apparent obstacles, in September 1944, she entered the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia, and in the spring of 1948 was accepted into the intern program of Welfare Island's Metropolitan Hospital. Subsequently she was asked to stay on as a pediatrics resident.

Following is the final Part 4 of Dr. Schrager's experiences and observations during her time on our island. It is excerpted from her autobiography Medicine, Matzoh Balls, and Motherhood, published in 2006 and available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Xlibris websites. (Photos courtesy of Dr. Schrager.)

During these years (1948–1951), more attention was focused on saving premature infants, and new technology was introduced. At Metropolitan we were still using a primitive incubator. It was little more than a square box with a thermostat for controlling temperature, a tube to admit oxygen and a lid on top. I learned that Babies' Hospital at Columbia had just acquired the latest equipment and I requested an elective rotation to go there and learn the features of their new type of incubator. It was very impressive. It had the ability to raise the oxygen concentration in the incubator to 100%, which was thought to be of great help to premature infants who were having trouble breathing.

When I returned to Metropolitan, I tried to raise the concentrations in our incubators to 100% by sealing the lids with tape, which could be easily undone when we wanted to tend to the baby. Try as I might, leakage always occurred around the seal and it was impossible to get the oxygen concentration over 40%. I felt very frustrated and inadequate because we could not deliver the

same level of care as Babies' Hospital. I felt even more frustrated because they were regularly diagnosing an eye disease of premature infants called retrolental fibroplasia (RLF), and we were not able to diagnose a single case. This condition involved the retina and I assumed that our instruments for viewing the retina were inadequate. The retina, which lines the back of the eyeball, is like the film of a camera. Nerves record the image and transport it to the brain. If the retina is damaged, blindness can result.



The cause of RLF (now called retinopathy of prematurity, ROP) was unknown at that time. Many thought it was the inevitable result of prematurity. Others thought it was a side effect of some medication we had used. It wasn't until years later that the toxic effect of high concentrations of oxygen was discovered. I had all the evidence right in front of me, but didn't have the insight to realize its significance. When the toxic effects of oxygen were recognized, the amount of oxygen given these babies was cut back severely. This caused anoxia, inadequate oxygen, which resulted in brain damage. Like so many other things in medicine, too much

of a good thing could be bad, but too little could be even worse.

ROP is still with us today because there are many factors other than oxygen levels that can cause the disease. But the number of cases has been reduced dramatically. Unfortunately, lawyers jumped at the opportunity to sue doctors on behalf of babies who had been damaged by too little or too much oxygen. This damage had occurred



before doctors had the knowledge about how oxygen should be regulated. But when a damaged child is brought into a court room,

a jury often feels that someone must pay. Many lawyers made huge fortunes in litigation over these cases. The fact that the doctors involved had worked unceasingly to save the lives of these babies, born prematurely, was often not considered.

When I was in training, child abuse did not receive much attention. During my final year of residency, the ambulance brought in two children in the last stages of starvation. They had been chained by their mother in a back room of their apartment. This was her revenge against their father, who she discovered having an affair with another woman. The couple had four children. The two who were named for the mother's family were properly fed and clothed. She had vented her rage on the two who were named for the father's family. The little boy died within hours of being admitted. The little girl was responding slowly to intravenous treatment. The Scielzo case made sensational headlines in all the New York newspapers. It was one of the first cases of child abuse reported in our area. Several days after the children were admitted, the father, a huge, burly man, appeared with

some very muscular friends. "I'm signing out my kid," he said. "Where is she?"

"You can't take her," I said. "She is still too sick."

He became very threatening. I picked up the phone and asked to speak to the medical director. He wasn't available, but I got through to the assistant director and told him the problem. "Is she still on the critical list?" he asked. I had to admit that she was recovering nicely and was no longer considered critical. "Then we have no right to keep the child," he said. "You'd better let her go."

I hung up the phone, looked straight at the group of threatening men, and lied. "The medical director is sending over a squad of police and security officers to arrest you. You'd better get out of here while you can."

One of the muscular friends said, "Look, we don't want no trouble," and urged the father to leave.

The next day the medical director called me. He was greatly agitated and roared over the phone, "We've just received a court order to keep that girl.

If you let the father take her, you're in big trouble." I calmly reassured him that she was still with us.

I finished my pediatrics residency at Metropolitan in June, 1951, and, since I had published research with Dr. Lange, I was offered a fellowship at New York Hospital-Cornell Medical College with Dr. Henry Barnett, who



was also investigating the nephrotic syndrome. I accepted, although the amount I would be making, \$100/month, did not include room and board. It was, in effect, a cut in pay. But I moved in with my parents in their Brooklyn apartment, so I had a little more pocket money.

My mother, who had so opposed the idea of her daughter becoming a doctor, was now reconciled and proud.

RIHS Calendar

Saturday, March 10, 2018

Capo Auction Valuation Day (see below): Find out how much your treasures are worth.

**Roosevelt Island Historical Society Lecture Series—FREE
@ the New York Public Library Branch, 524 Main St., 6:30 pm
Thursday, April 12, 2018**

Robert Kirkbride: The design of psychiatric hospitals in the 19th century.

Thursday, May 10, 2018

Jon Crispin: A return engagement to tell us more stories of the suitcases left behind by the patients at Willard State Psychiatric Hospital.

Thursday, June 14, 2018

Brooke Kroeger: Nellie Bly and her "Ten Days in the Madhouse."

What Are Your Treasures Worth?

**The Roosevelt Island Historical Society invites you to
bring your art, antiques and glassware
for a professional valuation* by the experts from
CAPO AUCTIONS**



**Saturday, March 10, 2018
12 noon to 5 pm
Chapel of the Good Shepherd
543 Main Street**

***Oral evaluations, not for legal purposes**

****\$25 donation to RIHS for valuation of three items**

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