HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are a variety of ways for students and teachers to experience American Art Deco: Designing for the People, 1918–1939. This guide can support each of them:

- Groups that schedule a docent-led tour of the exhibition can use the suggested activities under the Preparation section to prepare for their visit and can follow it with the activities listed in the Extension section.
- When bringing students to the exhibition for a teacher-led tour, educators can use the Exploring the Exhibition section to guide their group in examining specific objects.
- Groups that are unable to visit onsite can use any of the activities when examining images of featured exhibition works, which are viewable here: tinyurl.com/39t3kjwy.

The content and themes featured in this guide are best suited to upper elementary through high school grades. For some questions and activities, both a lower-grade and an upper-grade option are provided.

To schedule a student tour of the exhibition, visit: nelson-atkins.org/educators/school-tours.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The years 1918 to 1939 mark the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II. During these interwar years, American society experienced rapid change. Technological advances and innovations in production and materials gave rise to cities filled with automobiles and soaring buildings and enabled more people to travel, enjoy expanded leisure time, and furnish their homes with new consumer goods. Yet it was also a complicated time, when the optimism of the Roaring Twenties met the devastation of the Great Depression, and when racism and economic inequality disenfranchised many Americans.

A style known as Art Deco emerged during this period, its streamlined geometric forms influencing the world of art, design, and architecture. American Art Deco: Designing for the People, 1918-1939 explores the complexities of American history through a dazzling collection of Art Deco objects, from paintings and photographs to dinnerware and automobiles. It also celebrates the contributions of those who faced social inequities and considers the lasting impacts that this period had on American society. Students exploring the exhibition will have the opportunity to reflect on the role design plays in daily life and how the realities and attitudes of a particular historical moment are reflected in the art of that time.
SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION

This exhibition is organized into 11 thematic sections:

From Paris to America
At Paris’s Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) of 1925, designers showcased objects made with simplified lines, geometric forms, and precious materials. The Art Deco style, its name derived from the title of the exposition, was born. In this section, you will see examples of French Art Deco that inspired designers in America and beyond.

American Art Deco
Designers in the United States embraced the Art Deco style and its references to modern industrial life and progress. As the objects in this section demonstrate, they also tended to favor newly developed industrial materials like plastic, aluminum, and chrome in place of the luxury materials commonly used in Europe. This adaptation made the new style more accessible to American consumers.

The New Woman
During World War I, the need for workers to support the war effort led American women to work outside the domestic sphere on an unprecedented scale. Galvanized by this glimpse of equality, more women advocated for equal rights and battled societal restrictions during the interwar years. The fashions and other works on view in this section speak to the changing role of women in American life.

An Architectural Era
Industrial cities like Chicago and New York boomed after World War I. New skyscrapers marked the peak of the Art Deco style in the United States, becoming some of the tallest and most recognizable buildings in the world. In this section, view objects and images that illustrate the features of Art Deco architecture, with its emphasis on industrial power, commerce, and success, and its influence on home décor and visual art.

Art and Design
The strongest influence on American design after World War I—especially for products marketed to the middle class—was the Bauhaus, a German art school. Founded in 1919, the Bauhaus promoted simple, functional, well-crafted objects made with industrial processes and materials. This section features Bauhaus-inspired home goods.

Streamline Moderne
In the 1930s, a new version of the Art Deco style called Streamline Moderne emerged. Promoted at the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, this style featured sleeker rounded forms and reflected a preference for performance over ornamentation that was echoed in the speed and industrial efficiency of the era’s planes, trains, and automobiles.

On the Move
With the expansion of paved roads and the introduction of more broadly-affordable cars in the 1920s, the United States entered the era of the automobile. At the same time, the ongoing forced removal of Indigenous people from their ancestral lands and the mass exodus of Black Americans northward from southern states contributed to a sense of nation-wide movement rooted in a complex mix of freedom, opportunity, and oppression.

The Jazz Age — A Culture of Change
From 1919 to 1933, Prohibition prohibited the sale of alcohol, and drinking went underground. Clubs and dance halls sprang up, providing venues for jazz and blues artists as well as drag performers and cabaret acts. The Art Deco objects in this section project the glamour and energy of this boundary-pushing cultural moment.
SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION, continued

The Harlem Renaissance

The term Harlem Renaissance describes the interwar flourishing of literature, music, theater, dance, and visual art created by Black Americans. Fueled by a confluence of cultural factors, it was centered in New York but was present in many other cities around the country. Included in this section are works by Black artists and photographs of important figures within the Harlem Renaissance.

Economic Depression and Stimulus

The stock market crash of 1929 and the Dust Bowl of the early 1930s caused misery and severe economic hardship for many Americans. Artists, designers, and manufacturers responded to this crisis in a variety of ways, from documenting the struggles of the period to producing consumer goods that fit smaller budgets.

Modern Living

As the American economy recovered from the Depression, industries sold consumers a vision of modern life full of gleaming, labor-saving, mass-produced household items. Advertisements touted “the new” to ensure that “the old” became obsolete and unfashionable. The United States seemed to be speeding into a bright future full of progress, a view reflected in the works found in this section.

TIMELINE: 1918—1939

June 1919: Treaty of Versailles brings an end to World War I

Summer 1919: “Red Summer,” a nationwide outbreak of racial violence in which white mobs attack Black individuals, businesses, and communities

January 1920: Prohibition begins, making the production and sale of alcohol illegal in the U.S.

August 1920: Ratification of the 19th Amendment, which prohibits denial of the right to vote on the basis of sex

1923: The Cotton Club, legendary nightclub that would host many prominent Black performers while excluding Black patrons, opens in Harlem

May 1924: Immigration Act of 1924 goes into effect, banning Asians from immigrating to the U.S.

May 1927: American aviator Charles Lindbergh completes the first solo transatlantic non-stop flight, flying from New York to Paris in 33 1/2 hours

October 1929: Stock market crashes, marking the beginning of the Great Depression

May 1931: Empire State Building is completed

March 1933: President Franklin D. Roosevelt takes office and begins instituting the New Deal, a series of economic recovery initiatives meant to lift the U.S. out of the Great Depression

December 1933: Prohibition ends

April 1935: “Black Sunday” sees a severe dust storm strike the Plains as part of the Dust Bowl, a period of drought-driven disasters spanning the 1930s

May 1937: San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge opens

September 1939: World War II begins with the Nazi invasion of Poland
PREPARATION

What Do We Already Know?

This exhibition features art and design from the years 1918 through 1939. Hold a class brainstorming session to determine what students already know about the United States during that period. What was different about that era compared to life today? Can they think of any noteworthy people or events from that time?

Think Like a Designer

Designers, including those who worked in the Art Deco style, make choices based on both form and function. Ask each student to bring in a household good or school supply that they use often. This could be any product that was designed and sold to serve a purpose, such as a tool or utensil, a container or vessel, or an appliance.

Have students discuss the following questions for the object they chose:

- Who is meant to use this object? Where? How? What is its function?
- What features might make it function well?
- What might you change it to make it function better?
- How would you describe the appearance of the object? What shapes, lines, and colors do you see?
- What materials were used to make the object?
- Which do you think the designer of this object cared more about: making it look nice, or making it function well?

EXPLORING THE EXHIBITION

What is Art Deco?

For younger grades, ask students to compare and contrast the Cartier elephant mascot and the SATURN punch bowl.

Explain that designers of many kinds were drawn to the Art Deco style in the 1920s and 1930s. Art Deco can vary in appearance in different types of objects.

Questions to discuss for younger grades:

- What words would you use to describe each object?
- What lines and shapes do you notice?
- What materials were used to make each object?
- What do you think each one was used for?

For older grades, explain that American designers adapted the Art Deco style from its French origins into something that would appeal to consumers in the United States. Then, ask students to compare and contrast these two vases.

Questions to discuss for older grades:

- How are the forms, materials, and overall appearance similar and different between these two objects?
- Which one looks like it would be faster and cheaper to produce?
- Which one do you think would have sold better during the Great Depression?
EXPLORING THE EXHIBITION, continued

Art Deco in History

For younger grades, have students examine this 1931 plate, considering the following questions:
• How would you describe the appearance of this plate?
• What seems to be going on in this scene?
• What feeling or mood does the scene suggest to you?

Explain that the artist who made this plate wanted to capture the spirit of the jazz nightclubs that were popular in the 1930s. Then, play the audio clip of jazz musician Cab Calloway singing *Strange As It Seems* (accessible here: tinyurl.com/45wbu292) or watch the video of Calloway's *Jitterbug Party* (on view in the exhibition). Discuss:
• What feeling or mood does this piece of music suggest to you?
• Can you sense any similarities between the sound of jazz and the visual appearance of the plate?

If time permits, you can also show students the photograph *Portrait of Cab Calloway* taken by Carl van Vechten in 1933. Do they think Calloway’s pose and attitude in the photograph fit with the type of performer he was?

For older grades, have students examine the Packard car, considering these questions:
• How would you describe this car?
• What kinds of shapes, lines, and materials have been used in its design?
• What kind of person do you think would have owned a car like this?

Explain that Packards were the leading luxury cars of their time. This car was produced during the Great Depression, and it would have cost about $4,000 (approximately $70,000 in today’s dollars). Ask students: What can this car tell us about life in the United States in the 1930s?

Next, show students Margaret Bourke-White’s photograph, *The American Way, aka Louisville Flood* (1937) and ask: What is going on in this scene? What do you see that makes you say that?

Explain that this photograph was taken in 1937 by a photojournalist who was documenting the aftermath of a devastating flood. Discuss:
• What can this photo tell us about life in the United States in the 1930s?
• Do the car and the photograph have different things to say about the society that produced them? If so, why might that be?

Design in Daily Life

Have students examine the *Sparton Bluebird Radio (Model 566)* designed by Walter Dorwin Teague and produced by the Sparks-Withington Company in 1934. Discuss:
• What was the function of this object?
• How would you describe its appearance?
• Do you think it would have been easy to use? Why or why not?
• What is a product we use today that serves a similar function? How does its appearance and ease of use compare with this object?
EXTENSION

See Art Deco in Kansas City

Examples of Art Deco architecture can be found throughout Kansas City. Encourage students to visit the following buildings, or organize a bus tour to view them together and discuss the shapes, lines, and materials used in the Art Deco architecture that they see:

- Municipal Auditorium
- Kansas City Power and Light Building
- Jackson County Courthouse
- Lincoln High School

Act Like a Designer

Have students draw designs for their own consumer products, such as a household appliance, tool, utensil, or article of clothing. Encourage them to think about both the function of the object and its appearance. What features would they include to ensure that the object works well for its intended purpose? What style and materials would fit the tastes and needs of people living today?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books


Web

- *Art Deco from Google Arts & Culture.* View Art Deco works from around the world.
- *Art Deco at the Victoria & Albert Museum.* Read featured articles on Art Deco artists and artworks.
- *The Pendergast Years: Kansas City in the Jazz Age and Great Depression.* Explore the Kansas City Public Library’s Digital History portal detailing the city in the early 20th century.

Contact the Educator Resource Center (erc@nelson-atkins.org) if you need additional suggestions!

LEARNING STANDARDS

Visual Arts Anchor Standard #11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding

KS History, Government and Social Studies:
- 4.1 The student will recognize and evaluate continuity and change over time.
- 4.2 The student will analyze the context and draw conclusions about continuity and change.

MO Social Studies:
- 6th-12th: Explain connections between historical context and peoples' perspectives at the time in U.S. history.
- 9th-12th: Analyze the technological, artistic, intellectual, economic, and cultural changes of the first three decades of the 20th century to determine their effects on individuals and groups.