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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ART NOUVEAU AND ART DECO: THEIR DECORATIVE INFLUENCES

By
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
I. Art Nouveau and Art Deco: Their Ideals....	4
II. Art Nouveau and Art Deco: The Visual Image.....	10
III. Art Nouveau and Art Deco: Their Influences on My Work.....	16
FOOTNOTES.....	30
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	31

INTRODUCTION

My interest in the design of furniture and accessories has always leaned towards decoration. This inclination is reflected in my creation of unusual luxury objects such as ottomans, fans, and umbrella stands, as well as in the use of color and surface embellishment.

My fascination with ornamentation has led to an intensive study of two historical periods noted for their interest in decoration, namely Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

These two periods, running approximately between the years 1890 and 1925, were an era in which there was a heightened interest in the decorative or applied arts. This time period begins with and is a reaction to the disordered society and eclectic objects created as a result of the Industrial Revolution. It is the period between the decline of Historism and the rise of the Bauhaus. Art Nouveau was strongly opposed to the rampant historical eclecticism then practiced on the Continent. The

aim was to create a wholly new, unified style that would be appropriate for a new lifestyle, and would not depend upon past motifs. Although it now appears excessively decorative and somehow overpowering, Art Nouveau was actually the beginning of the simplification of the applied arts in the hope that objects might be mass produced inexpensively by machine and yet be beautiful. Art Deco has its roots in this style and in many ways continued the effort of simplification, while remaining essentially ornamental.

A comparison of Art Nouveau and Art Deco reveals a basic similarity in ideals; the contrast is found in the actual visual appearance of the objects produced at this time. Both Art Nouveau and Art Deco contain an extensive and extremely varied library of visual concepts and motifs. The most commonly known Art Nouveau qualities are extreme curvilinear forms and lines, while other components of what may be called the Art Nouveau movement employed straight, mostly vertical lines and geometry for decoration. Art Deco, born in a new age of speed and fast transportation, generally became more simplified, angular and streamlined. It did not, however, abandon decoration as a

vehicle for expression. There are also variations of the Art Deco style. The traditionalists created curvilinear objects, although again they are more simplified than those in the Art Nouveau style.

This comparison of Art Nouveau and Art Deco will aid in the discussion of my work exhibited in the Graduate Thesis Show. I have always considered a wide range of images important to my design process, and believe that a focused study of particular historical works and styles helps to provide this reference. The Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles are of special interest to me because of the decorative aspects and their fascination with luxury.

I. ART NOUVEAU & ART DECO: THEIR IDEALS

Art Nouveau is one name given to the style of decorative arts which flourished between the years 1895 and 1902. The style refers mostly to crafts, graphic design and architectural and interior design rather than the fine arts, although there was some Art Nouveau painting and sculpture. This style closely followed the Arts and Crafts movement in England, while on the Continent it succeeded the Historicism era.

There are many reasons for the birth of Art Nouveau, foremost was the adverse reaction by designers to the craze for Historicism. Historicism refers to the use of historical motifs and styles in the design of late nineteenth century decorative arts.¹ This use of eclectic motifs made interiors cluttered. The Art Nouveau designer realized that this eclecticism did not bear any working relationship to the rapidly changing, urban industrialized lifestyle. As a solution, designers aimed for unity within modern interiors, and developed

a new architecture and approach to graphic design. This dream for a unified interior was achieved through the coordination of objects such as furniture, textiles, silver and glass. French designers at this time took a different stance. They were primarily interested in the expression of beauty through an individual object.²

An important influence on the Art Nouveau philosophy was the undesirable effects of the Industrial Revolution. The objects produced by the new machine and the social order created by mechanization did not live up to the utopian expectations industrialization promised. The historical motifs mentioned earlier were all too often poorly produced and vulgarized in the production process. A solution was sought in the early form of an "industrial designer". This created a closer alliance between the artist and the artisan or manufacturer. The goal was to produce well-made objects for a more comfortable environment.

As a result of this search for the well-made object, the Art Nouveau period became one of the last crafts revivals.³ This wish for fine craftsmanship stemmed from one of the influences on Art Nouveau,

the Arts and Crafts Movement. This movement was founded by William Morris and based on the earlier writings of John Ruskin. The philosophy called for a return to sound craftsmanship and a social order in which an individual craftsman produced beautiful, well-made objects for everyday use.⁴ The desired lifestyle, according to this movement, was a return to that of the Middle Ages.

Many of the products of the Arts and Crafts movement reflect this medieval influence and except for the superb craftsmanship and the philosophy behind them, are reminiscent of Historicism. The Art Nouveau designer attempted to abolish the historical influences and to create a new aesthetic, in addition to keeping the integrity of the object alive through craftsmanship and design.

Art Deco refers to the period of time between approximately 1905 and 1925. It also is a decorative arts style and a revival of craftsmanship. The aversion for the poorly made, mass-produced object was still prevalent. However, the ideal of fine crafts for the masses was replaced by the more realistic ideal of crafts for the privileged buyer. Luxury

and decoration were obtained through the use of rare, expensive materials.

There were two main branches of the Art Deco style, although every artist had a unique mode of expression. The traditionalists had obvious roots in Art Nouveau and also earlier styles. They did manage to simplify, to some extent, what they considered to be the overly ornamental and decadent curvilinear forms of Art Nouveau. These artists sought an extension of the luxuries prevalent in the aristocratic period. The other branch revolted against this further stylization or adaptation of past styles and artists started to follow the new painting and theatre trends, utilizing the bright colors of the Fauves and the geometric, volumetric forms of the Cubists. Furniture was simplified in order that it might become an integral part of interior design and architecture.

For both Art Nouveau and Art Deco, decoration was the primary aim. In the early 1900's "...[decoration] signified the highest degree of unity and beauty possible in a work of art."⁵ It was considered

beneficial for beauty to be separated from function, in opposition to more contemporary philosophy that function in and of itself is beauty, and that surface decoration detracts from this aesthetic.

Art Nouveau and Art Deco had some philosophical and practical conflicts. This was especially evident in the Art Nouveau objective which was to create beautiful objects for every home. Art Nouveau's asymmetrical curve was seldom, if ever, suitable for mass production and required the attention of a highly skilled technician or craftsman. This made production of the actual piece very expensive, despite the desire to popularize the work. As Art Nouveau became better accepted, there was some attempt to copy its designs for mass-production, a process which vulgarized the objects. The original enthusiasm of the designers diminished when this occurred. The style lost momentum. A similar end was dealt Art Deco; when the effort to mass-produce began, the refinement essential to this delicate, sophisticated style was lost. The death of the traditionalist branch was also due to the financial crisis of the Second World War. The popularity of decoration and

the attempt to keep beauty separate from function lost ground to the new idea that a form is beautiful when it is pure, unadorned, and functional. The more simplified, revolutionary branch of Art Deco was carried into the new style of the Bauhaus. The new products were more easily mass-produced and less reminiscent of a decadent, aristocratic past.

II. ART NOUVEAU & ART DECO: THE VISUAL IMAGE

The most striking contrast between Art Nouveau and Art Deco is found in the actual visual appearance of the objects and in the influences behind these two styles. Art Nouveau, although it appeared to be "the monstrous extension of a single and same personality" to the Art Deco designers Sue and Mare⁶, is actually extremely varied in form and influence. This was mainly due to the fact that each country produced a few major designers who created their own unique style.

The Art Nouveau artist/designers on the Continent (those of France, Belgium, and Germany), in their effort to create a wholly new style and a unification of design, turned primarily to nature as a source of inspiration. As a result, names such as "Lily Style", "Noodle Style", and "Eel Style", were accorded to these styles. In Germany the Art Nouveau style was called "Jugendstil" or Young Style. These designers picked out the curved line and asymmetry present in nature to develop a language of expression. Often bizarre flowers or plants were used. Flowers were first used extensively, at the beginning of this

period, then stem and vines became more commonly used as motifs. Finally, the images became wholly abstracted and line became the main vehicle for expression. "Line became melodious, agitated, undulating, flowing, and flaming"⁷. The curved line that recurved quickly on itself, the whiplash, was very popular. Curved lines on furniture and architecture during the Art Nouveau period in France, Belgium, and Germany were executed in three-dimensional moldings rather than superficially applied. In most cases design took priority over consideration for the properties inherent in the materials. Of these three countries, France had the most refined style. The emphasis was on grace and beauty; these qualities often became decadent and overly extravagant. The designers of France wished to continue with the luxury of their past, which led them to craft each piece exquisitely. They concentrated on individual pieces rather than compatible ones. The designers of Belgium and Germany looked more to the future and tried to create a totally new style and energy in tune with their contemporary society. Here the curved line contained more vitality. These designers also made use of new materials, such as

iron and steel in their buildings. The Art Nouveau of Scotland and Austria, named the Glasgow Style and Sezessionstil, respectively, contrasts strongly with the above mentioned curvilinear styles.⁸ In these two countries, designers used the straight, geometric line as decoration. Theirs was the epitome of the unified interior, in which all objects worked together to present a common mood. In Scotland, the rectilinear motif was combined with elegantly curved, stylized ornamentation. Often melancholy women with long hair and flowing drapery were depicted. Subtle colors were the rule and white was used extensively as a background color.

The art and architecture of Japan was one influence these visually contrasting Art Nouveau styles had in common. The Japanese interior was simple, light-filled and unified. These spaces were refreshing to Europeans, becoming tired of their dark, gloomy, Victorian interiors. Japanese prints were filled with a vibrant interest in nature, asymmetry and curvilinear lines. In spite of the aversion to Historicism, there were still historical influences in Art Nouveau design. Celtic art had an effect on the

Scottish style, seen in the delicate, curvilinear decoration which sometimes almost reaches the point of ancient Celtic manuscript tracery. The French style, always tied to its ancestors, gained inspiration from the ornate Baroque, Louis XIV and especially the Rococo styles. The grace and femininity of the Rococo Age contributed to the refinement of the new style. The Baroque influence can be seen in the more three-dimensional Art Nouveau moldings and objects.

After the deterioration of Art Nouveau, Art Deco carried on this tradition of decoration. This love of beauty was expressed through the embellishment of an object. However, this style was mainly French and grew to be as extravagant and luxurious as French Art Nouveau. There was, in the Deco period, more emphasis placed on the use of rare and exotic materials, e.g. ebony, ivory, rare woods, shagreen, leather, and metal. Also, the new styles in painting paved the way for the bold use of color; lacquer was used extensively. Black and chrome combinations were popular. Inlays and patterns of exotic veneers became common methods of surface decoration. The traditionalists involved in the Art Deco movement still utilized curvilinear lines

and forms and some historical motifs in their works, while the more innovative branch of artists used volumetric, geometric motifs in their objects. These motifs produced a much more simplified effect than that of the Art Nouveau style. Surfaces in the Art Deco style are decorated two-dimensionally, while those of Art Nouveau are decorative in a three-dimensional manner.

Although the Art Deco designers criticized their Art Nouveau predecessors for decadence and "an expression of profound disease"⁹, they owed much to the previous period, particularly to the simplified, geometric decoration of Scotland and Austria. From the Art Nouveau period they gained the tradition of fine craftsmanship without which neither style could have been successful. Art Nouveau designers also laid the groundwork for Art Deco's further unification and simplification which was carried even further in the functional aesthetic of the German Bauhaus. Art Deco, more than Art Nouveau, found inspiration in the exotic Near East, Orient, and South American cultures. These played a large role in the use of bright colors and stepped pyramid shapes sometimes found in Art Deco

objects. One great influence on Art Deco was that of speed. Life now moved at a greater pace and transportation was faster. Line changed from the flowing curve to a more angular, streamlined one, appropriate to the new age. The Art Deco designer was less opposed to the use of historical styles in his work than the Art Nouveau artist. Their use of luxurious materials and historical motifs caused one author to comment that Art Deco was "obsessively romantic and backward looking...influenced by the ornate past".¹⁰ Indeed, the Art Deco style, in its seemingly endless variations, used almost every historical style, extensive exotic influence, and the impact of velocity upon their lifestyle for inspiration. It is a stylization for the sake of luxury, almost becoming a mannerist style; where as Art Nouveau, in its search for the new and its actual creation of motifs could be considered a movement rather than a style.

III. ART NOUVEAU & ART DECO: THEIR INFLUENCES ON MY WORK

My foremost intention when designing and building furniture or small objects is to create a pleasing, decorative object. To me, the aesthetic of function, meaning that the piece is stripped to the barest minimum at which it can still function, becomes cold and impersonal. Decoration reflects a humanness and beauty too often lost in today's high-tech world. However, it is not my intent to create purely decorative pieces; function is important to me, although most times secondary in priority to design. I am attracted to objects such as umbrella stands, mirrors, folding screens and ottomans for their suggestions of romance and mood. Even functional pieces designed to be beautiful demand special treatment and must be cared for carefully. It is this desire for the elegant and beautiful object that first drew me to the Art Nouveau and Art Deco periods. They are the epitome of an effort to create a beautiful, decorative, luxurious object. They contain, in an endless variety,

motifs and inspiration for the creation of objects.

Of my thesis work, the book cabinet is my most authentic Art Nouveau work. It was created as a commission, to enhance a room already furnished with fine furniture, very dark in color. Thus, the lighter color of the maple was chosen to offset the sombre effect of the room. The authentically Art Nouveau elements are found in the door and handles; the asymmetrical curves and carving reflect the Belgian style. The three-dimensionality of the carving on the doors are reminiscent of the decorated surface important to the Art Nouveau designer. However, the carcass of the cabinet loses this effect, becoming flat and almost a prop for the doors. The curves in the frames are the same size and thickness and almost symmetrical. The carcass could have been more successful had I made it more volumetrically curved to match the three dimensionality of the doors. In spite of this drawback, the cabinet does possess, through the tapering, curved door handles and carving, much of the delicacy and grace found in the true curvilinear Art Nouveau style.

The chair and ottoman represent a less direct



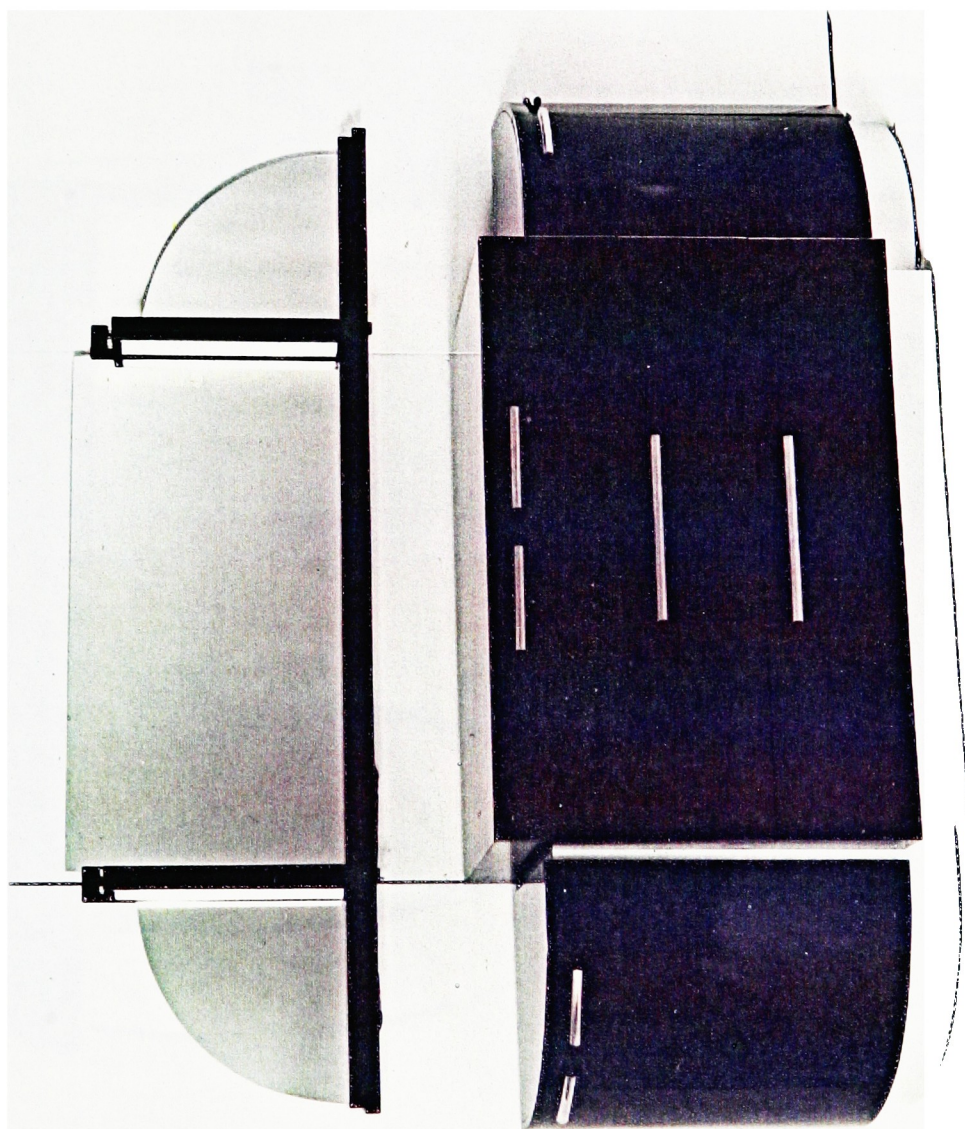
reflection of the Art Nouveau period. The frame lines change in thickness along their length, which reminds me of German Art Nouveau. The brilliant red brocade upholstery fabric was used to create a feeling of luxury and presence. Although the side view is fairly successful in its stance, its grace is overpowered by the extremely wide front and heavy legs. The heavy legs also impede my effort to create a graceful, flowing line throughout the chair. It loses functionality in the back where the space between the ribs thrusts the sitter forward into a less than comfortable position. The delicacy lost in the chair, however, is regained to some extent in the more refined ottoman, whose members are thinner and seem to harmonize better than that of the chair. In the addition of the ottoman I sought to create an effect of luxurious comfort and it is the most successful piece in the set.

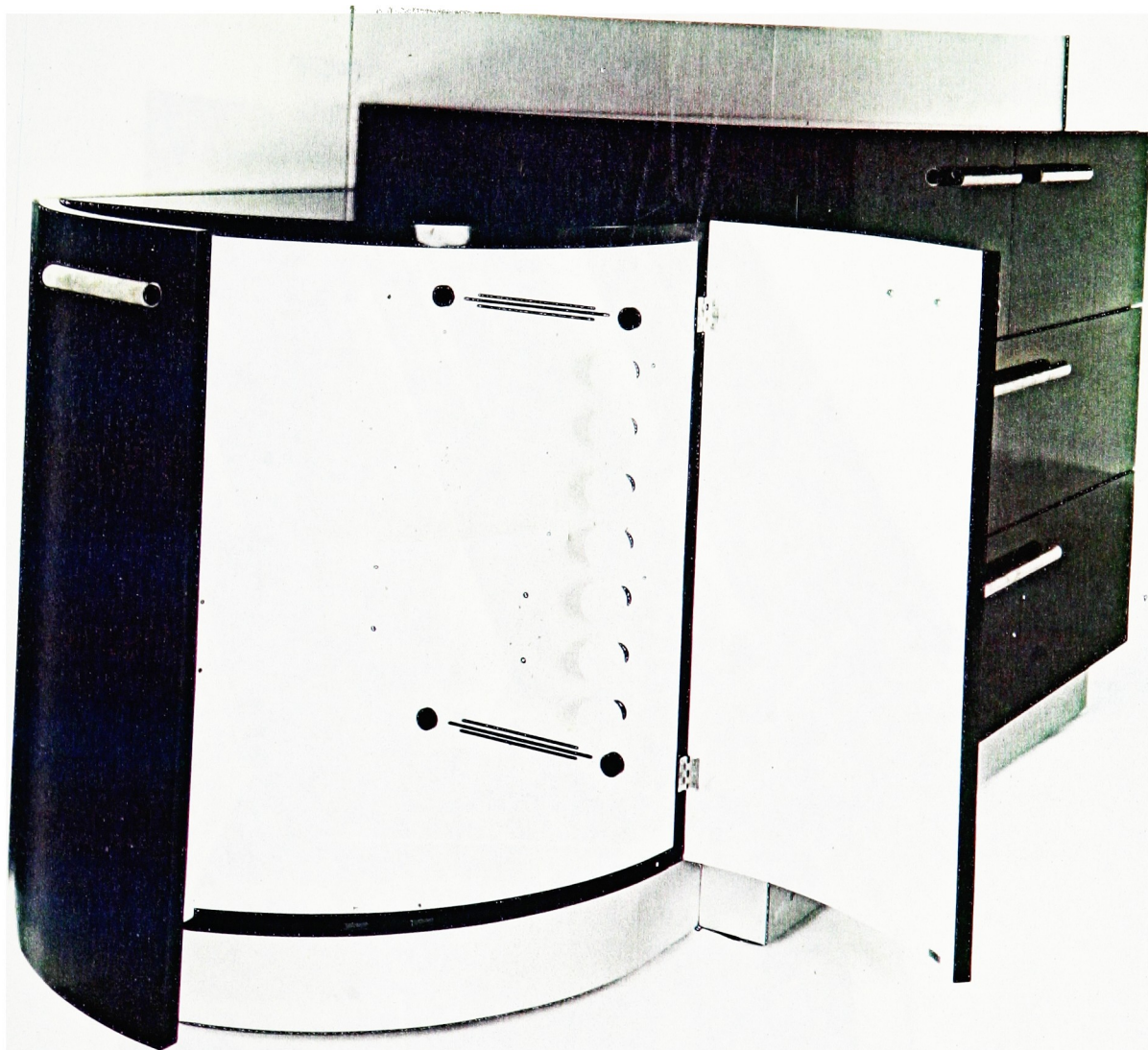
My exploration of decorative motifs for creating beautiful objects, began in Art Nouveau and then next extended to Art Deco. I was interested in the geometric shapes and volumes and the bright colors of this style, combined with the ongoing search for decoration and luxury. The first of my thesis pieces to be Art Deco

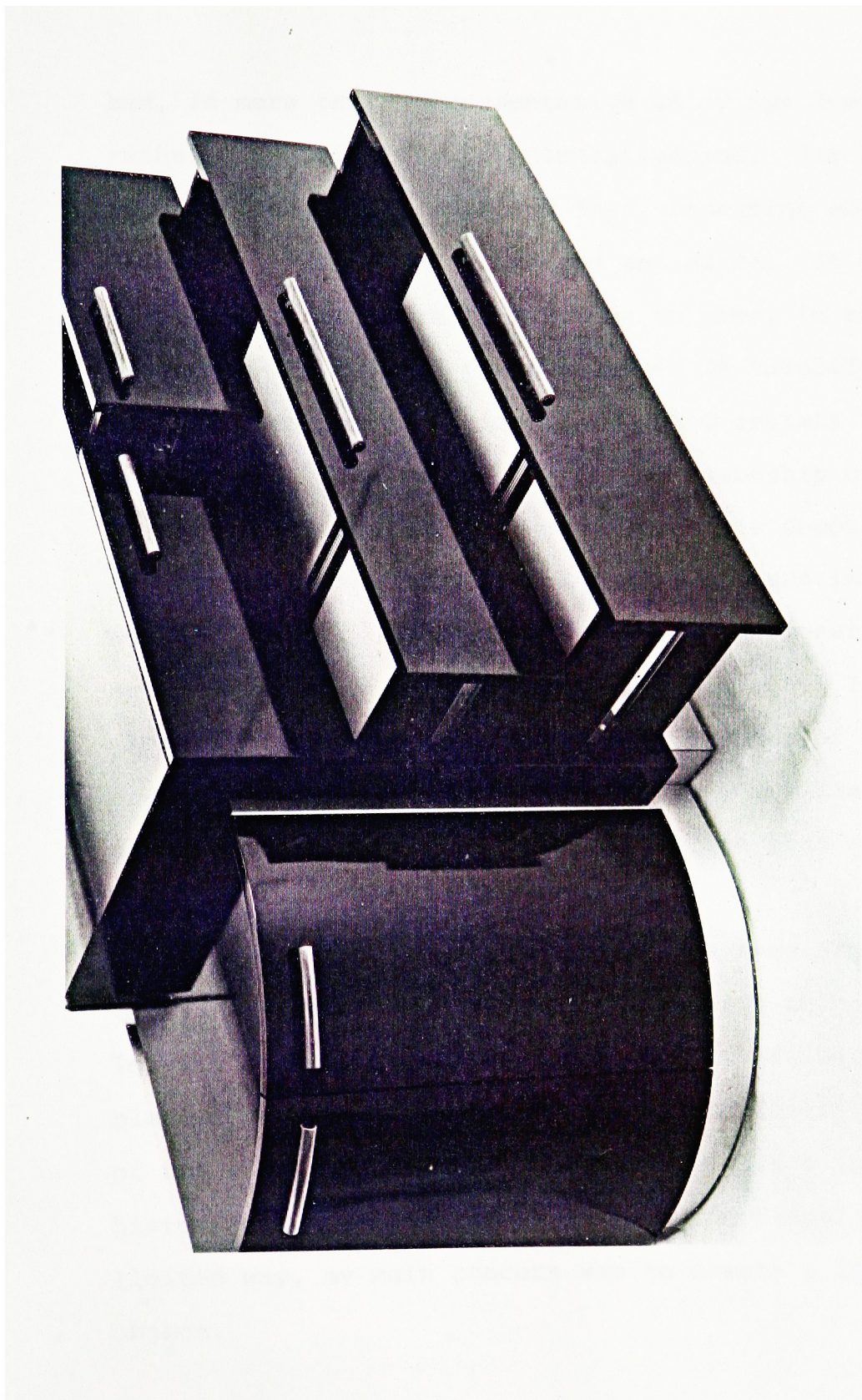


influenced was the chest of drawers and mirror set. It is, unintentionally, extremely similiar in form to a piece created by Donald Deskey for the Radio City Music Hall in New York City. The chest is truly Art Deco in color and finish; black and silver was very popular during the 1920's. I used the aluminum base to create the effect of a floating black volume. Instead of the more common combination of black and white I chose a subtle pink for the interior of the two quarter-circular cabinets, drawer bottoms, and the louvres of the mirror. The pink surfaces are further decorated by the addition of black stripes and circles and highlighted by a row of circular light bulbs on the interior of the cabinets. The shape of the mirror reflects the top view of the cabinet itself and its lights are meant to create a mood for a bedroom, further adding to the total effect of extravagance. My decision to make this chest and mirror was based on a desire to create flamboyant works. I was fairly successful at obtaining this goal, but the piece is so closely inspired by Art Deco that it dominates my personal directions.

The small table, intended to be placed beside a



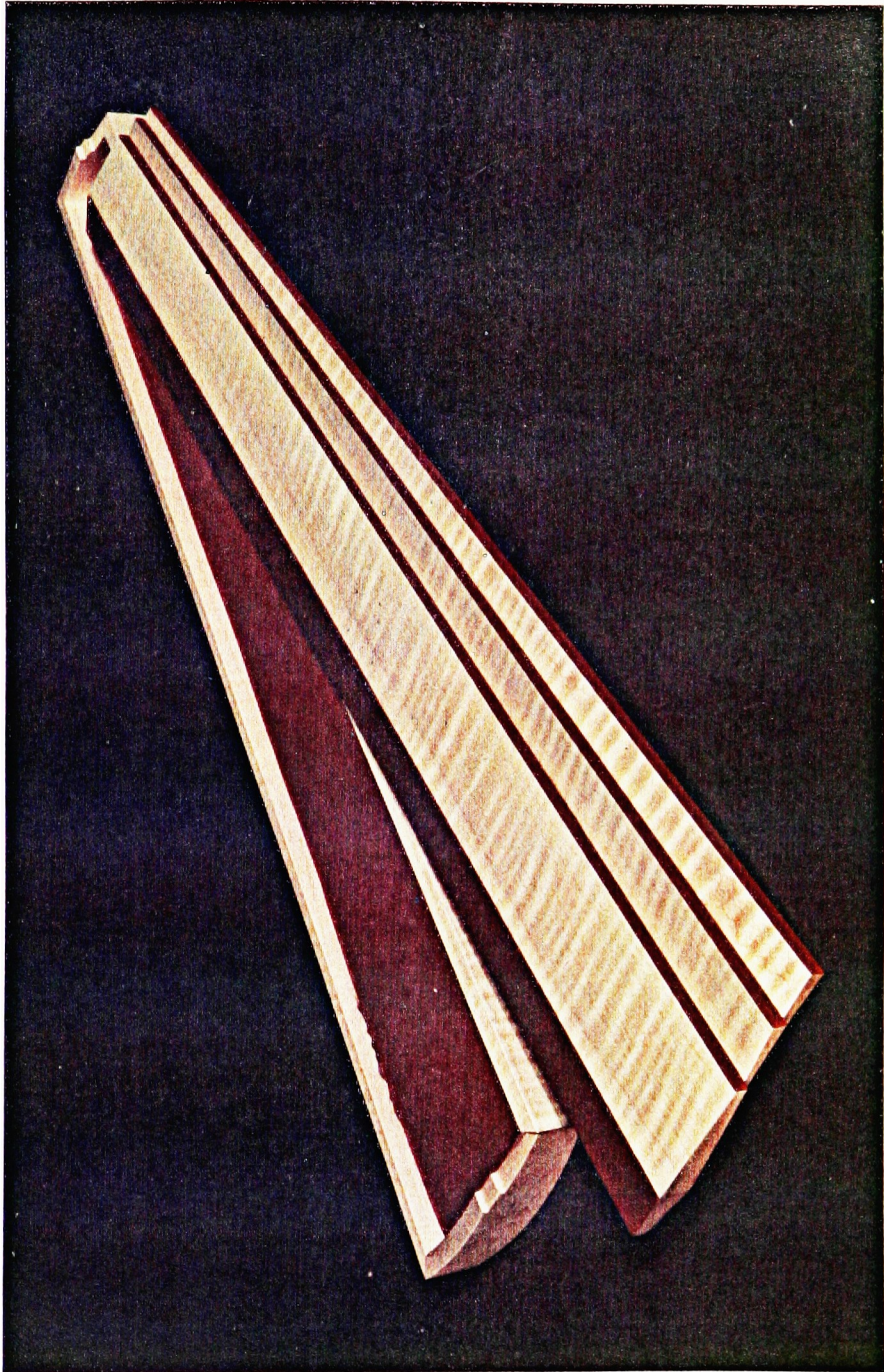


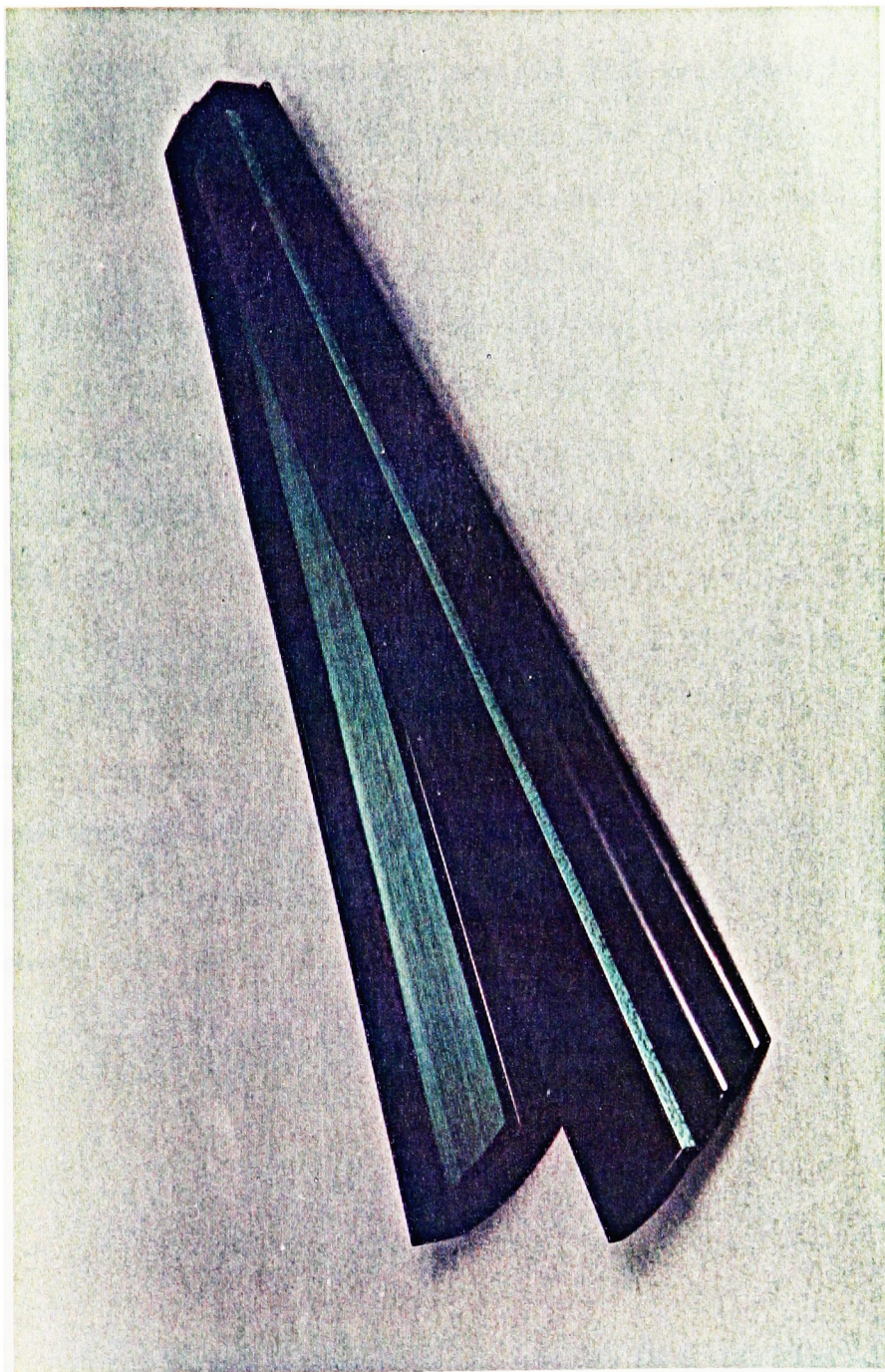


bed, is more truly representative of my own design rather than being of a particular period. Due to the sharp angles of the legs and feet, repeating shapes and the use of rich woods (rosewood and narra), it draws reference to Art Deco. It brings to mind, in the stance of the pointed feet, a rocket at takeoff, representing the speed phenomena Art Deco artists popularized. However, it is the relationship of the shapes to one another that make the table decorative as opposed to the addition of inlays or superimposed surface design. In this way, it becomes closer to the Art Nouveau ideal of the decorative surface. In this piece I feel I have combined the influences of Art Deco and to a smaller extent of Art Nouveau, yet created a piece that is more individual and unique than a "period" piece.

The two glove boxes represent the same approach as the small table. The repeating, fan-like shapes and long, slender bodies are reminiscent of Art Deco; the pleated effect of the tops retain the decorative quality of the surface. However, the overall effect is not truly historical. Although the boxes are functional in a limited way, my main concern was to create a decorative object.







The pieces I built as part of my thesis work represent my search for motifs and inspirations through a study of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, a historical era in which the decorative arts were of great interest and in full bloom. Through this study, I realized that historical styles preceeding the 1890's had a great effect on these two periods and also hold many interesting possibilities for me. These furniture pieces should serve as a basis for further study and design, which will lead away from a literal use of historical motifs and evolve into a personal expression. The small table and boxes represent the beginning of this continuing effort. With a continued interest in the creation of luxury objects, I look forward to a wider study of historical periods and a more personal means of expression.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Joseph Prutch, "Contemporary Furniture and the Pursuit of Comfort" (unpublished M.F.A. Thesis, Rochester Institute of Technology, 1981), p.4.
- 2 Stephan Tschudi Madson, Sources of Art Nouveau (New York: Da Capo Press, 1975) p. 372.
- 3 Mildred Constantine and Peter Selz, ed., Art Nouveau, Art and Design at the Turn of the Century (London: Secker and Warburg, 1975), p. 97.
- 4 Stephan Tschudi Madson, Art Nouveau (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967) p. 44-45.
- 5 Constantine and Selz, Art Nouveau, Art and Design at the Turn of Century, p. 29.
- 6 Yvonne Brunhammer, The Nineteen Twenties Style (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969) p. 135.
- 7 Constantine and Selz, Art Nouveau, Art and Design at the Turn of the Century, p. 10
- 8 Madson, Art Nouveau, p. 20-21.
- 9 Madson, Sources of Art Nouveau, p. 302.
- 10 Martin Graif, Depression Modern, the 30's Style in America (New York: Universe Books, 1975) p. 15.

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