



DECADENCE REDISCOVERED

Born in Paris during the heady post-war period, the Art Deco movement quickly transformed 1920s London with its luxury and excess, fanciful architecture and avant garde attitudes. Today, an Art Deco renaissance is gold-plating the streets of London with classic style and savoir faire



PAUL NICHOLLS-WHITEMAN SURVEYS THE SAVOY HOTEL'S newly refurbished Thames foyer like a child in a candy shop, greedily taking in the embellished columns, the delicate crystal chandeliers, the green and gold stained glass. We may be sitting in front of one of the finest afternoon spreads in the whole of London – tier upon tantalising tier of heavenly tidbits – but the Art Deco expert is too busy gorging himself on the architecture to worry about smoked salmon, scones, and slowly cooling Savoy blend tea.

“This is the first time I’ve visited the hotel for a long time and I was a worried they might go over the top with the renovation,” admits Nicholls-Whiteman, “but this is perfect. Afternoon tea here has always been my ultimate London treat – more so for the design than the dining. Anyone who loves Art Deco should indulge themselves. The only problem is that now they’ve made it even harder for me to stay away!”

The Savoy’s revamp has given London’s fascination with all things Art Deco a shot in the arm. The Saudi-owned luxury hotel re-opened its doors last October after undergoing the

most ambitious refurbishment in British history, taking nearly three years and costing US\$360 million. Celebrated French designer Pierre Yves Rochon led the project, revitalising the Savoy’s core Art Deco style while adding a modern touch and integrating state-of-the-art facilities.

The Thames Foyer, where Paul and I nibble sandwiches and sip Louis Roeder champagne, remains the Savoy’s beating heart. A stunning glass cupola now floods the room with natural light. Beneath the dome nestles a new winter garden gazebo where a pianist serenades impeccably dressed guests. Fabric-covered walls boast murals and gilt-edged mirrors. The 51,000 pieces of new Wedgwood china match the décor.

After tea, Paul and I move to the decidedly more glamorous surroundings of the Savoy’s Beaufort Bar, where Rochon appears to have unleashed all his nocturnal fantasies. Strangely squandered as a meeting and storage room prior to the refurbishment, this opulent space now incorporates the hotel’s former cabaret stage as the centrepiece of a theatrical, Art Deco-inspired lounge. The bar is cloaked in

£21,000-worth of black velvet curtain, while £40,000 of gold leaf adorns a succession of tall, burnished alcoves. London's A-list crowd has already made it their own.

Despite the selective addition of bling, the Savoy's management stress the importance of tradition and good taste. "Understated' is still the watchword," says Simon Gilkes, director of sales, as we sip drinks on the stage where George Gershwin premiered his jazz piece "Rhapsody in Blue". "We wanted to keep the Savoy's soul, but elevate it, to make it the best hotel in the world."

Afterwards, Paul Nicholls-Whiteman and I wander down to the Strand, past a new Art Deco crystal fountain commissioned from Lalique and a succession of gleaming Rolls Royces. Kaspar the Savoy cat is depicted in two manicured shrubs, beyond which a mass of London rush hour commuters head for Charing Cross Station.

"This place was pretty avant garde when it opened in 1889," says Paul as we join the throng. "It was the first luxury hotel in Britain with an electric light in each room, hot water and electric lifts. It's always been the centre of London high society. Everyone from Charlie Chaplin and Oscar Wilde to Richard Harris and George Clooney has stayed here."

"I think the most revolutionary thing about this renovation is how successfully they've separated the Art Deco and Edwardian styles," he continues. "From the door handles to the light switches, every Art Deco room is a work of art." I secretly suspect Paul may book in for the night.

BORN IN PARIS, THE ART DECO STYLE BELONGS TO A WORLD of glamour, luxury and risqué attitudes – at its most popular and prevalent during the inter-war, golden years of the 1920s and 1930s when liberated jazz culture was at its height. The



PREVIOUS PAGE: The Park Lane Hotel's enchanting Palm Court; crystal light fittings at the Park Lane Hotel's ballroom
FAR LEFT TO RIGHT: The Drawing Room at the Park Lane Hotel; the famous cat Kaspar; the Savoy's Beaufort Bar

"ART DECO HAS BEEN ONE OF THE MOST APPEALING AND INFLUENTIAL ARTISTIC MOVEMENTS OF THE PAST HUNDRED YEARS."

Images: Daniel Allen, Getty Editorial

and office blocks through to cinemas and subway stations. Today a tour around Art Deco London would take in such iconic buildings as Battersea Power Station, Fleet Street's Daily Express and Daily Telegraph Buildings, and the BBC Broadcasting House, plus classic examples of Art Deco revivalism such as the far more recent MI6 headquarters sitting beside Vauxhall Bridge.

"Given the English people's somewhat conservative tastes, the Art Deco style in London remains surprisingly popular," says Paul Nicholls-Whiteman. "People don't associate London with Art Deco like they do with New York, Paris or Shanghai, but you just have to know where to look."

"London hotels have been the stronghold for Art Deco architecture, and drawn the tourist crowds, but I think today wealthier locals are also drawn to the Art Deco lifestyle," he continues. "It's hedonistic; after the misery of the recent recession people want to have fun and indulge, even if only for an evening. There's also the element of class – Art Deco might be showy, but there's a certain elegance involved."

Sarah Whitham from London's Park Lane Hotel agrees. The hotel's Palm Court lounge, one of the capital's most prestigious Art Deco-inspired spaces, has seen a rise in popularity as the economy slowly recovers from the near financial meltdown of the late 2000s. "Our patrons want to be transported back to a bygone era of style and savoir-faire," she says. "They're looking for a luxurious experience, but one that's rooted in culture and sophistication. Tasteless bling and ostentatious displays of wealth are definitely out."

THE SAVOY AND PARK LANE HOTELS AREN'T THE ONLY establishments cashing in on London's renewed love affair with all things Art Deco. Ensnared in Mayfair's maze of exclusive thoroughfares, Claridge's burst onto the capital's social scene in the 1930s. Stars, socialites and the crowned heads of Europe have enjoyed five-star luxury here for over 100 years, and today it remains a true Art Deco icon.

When I arrive at Claridge's most of London is sleeping. Guests' privacy has to be respected, so a 6am photoshoot in the lobby has been organised. Despite the early hour, PR manager Simon Neggers is on hand to meet and greet, and rustle up a much-needed double espresso.

Claridge's lobby is truly fabulous. In 1929, thirty years after Claridge's opened its doors, pioneering architect Oswald Milne transformed this space into an enduring Art Deco masterpiece. Over the last 82 years the weighty revolving foyer doors, fingerprinted for decades by the rich and famous, have lifted countless hearts and minds with each rotation.

"Walking into Claridge's is and always has been special," says Paul Nicholls-Whiteman. "There's always a temptation to bound up that gloriously wide staircase, but the lobby is such a spectacle to behold that most people simply stop in their tracks. When you stand in the middle of that polished, checkerboard marble, surrounded by saffron walls and alabaster ceilings, you know you've arrived in a unique hotel."

Beyond Claridge's lobby is The Foyer, packed with more Art Deco gorgeousness. Green leather banquettes, silver-

very term conjures up romantic images of ocean liners gliding across moonlit seas, the kiss of glasses in chrome-clad bars, and big band jazz in ornate ballrooms.

After the hardships of the First World War, English society fell in love with Art Deco's frippery and sybaritic excess. "Art Deco has been one of the most appealing and influential artistic movements of the past hundred years," explains Elaine Harwood, an expert on the 20th Century at English Heritage.

"It was born in an age of great socio-economic change and technological progress. Art Deco's streamlined forms and innovative materials were very futuristic. Designers took inspiration from a diversity of historic sources, employing geometric patterns from civilisations such as the Aztecs and ancient Egyptians. Ultimately, this world of artistic exuberance, optimism and vitality was a world of fantasy – a world as escapist as Hollywood musicals of the same era. Its legacy remains one of beauty, craft and imagination."

From the late 1920s onwards, London's architects, many of whom had visited Paris, incorporated Art Deco into a growing number of projects. These ranged from factories

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The Daily Telegraph Building's Art Deco clock; Claridge's lobby; tasty treats at high tea at Claridge's Foyer



AFTER A SUMPTUOUS CLARIDGE'S BREAKFAST, I TAKE A short walk through Mayfair where Paul Nicholls-Whiteman shows me another of his favourite haunts – the Burlington Arcade. Lined with a succession of luxury boutiques, London's longest and most beautiful covered shopping street dates back to 1819. Today it makes a great spot for some Art Deco retail therapy.

“For connoisseurs of Art Deco jewellery, the arcade is a treasure trove,” says Nicholls-Whiteman, as we wander past gleaming shopfronts “Jewellers here offer an eclectic range of fine pieces. If you need advice, or simply want to know a little more about the arcade's history, ask one of the uniformed beadles. They're employed to keep things civilised, but are very genial and knowledgeable guys.”

In Bentley & Skinner we chat with David, a thirty-something designer wistfully examining an exquisite Art Deco Cartier brooch. “I fell in love with Art Deco when I visited an exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum,” he says. “Bit by bit I'm redecorating my apartment in Art Deco style. I've had my eye on this brooch for a while but I need a few Christmas bonuses before it comes home with me.”

A classic style and lifestyle, Art Deco reflects a key period in modern cultural history – the romantic age of Greta Garbo, the Charleston, head-hugging cloche hats and the world's first skyscrapers. Nearly a century after it began to appear in the capital's shops, homes and architecture, Art Deco is again lifting spirits across London.

“I'm often asked if the passion for Art Deco remains,” says Nicholls-Whiteman. “Of course it does. In its heyday Art Deco may have covered the world in its divine curves, but the movement was about more than just buildings or bookcases. It's about liberation – freedom to express emotion and good taste, to have fun, to be daring, to be optimistic. That's as true in London today as it always was.” 🍷

encrusted peacock feathers and crystal chandeliers are overlooked by a stupendous Dale Chihuly silver-white light sculpture assembled from over 800 hand-blown glass pieces. It's here I meet with Guy Oliver, the hotel's Art Deco consultant for the last 20 years.

“For me, Claridge's is a true labour of love,” explains Oliver. “Setting the right tone with design and décor has always been paramount. Over the years I've tried to maintain the glorious aesthetic that began when pioneering Art Deco architect Basil Ionides transformed this building back in the 1920s.”

Oliver is looking forward to sharing that legacy when Art Deco tours of Claridge's start this month. Led by Oliver or another of the hotel's Art Deco experts, an hour of sightseeing will be capped by afternoon tea in The Foyer.

“We decided it was time to share some of the hotel's less well known treasures,” explains Oliver. “Guests and visitors typically enjoy famous and more obvious examples of the hotel's Art Deco décor, such as the leaping stags in the Brook Street entrance, the Lalique panel in The Fumoir or the gilt mirrors in The Foyer, but there's a whole lot more to see. The tours will give participants a real insight into the hotel and its design history.”

WORDS DANIEL ALLEN Daniel loves Art Deco so much he styles his hair in the shape of a 1940s ocean liner. It takes him two hours, but he claims elegance can't be rushed.