

# The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts of 1925

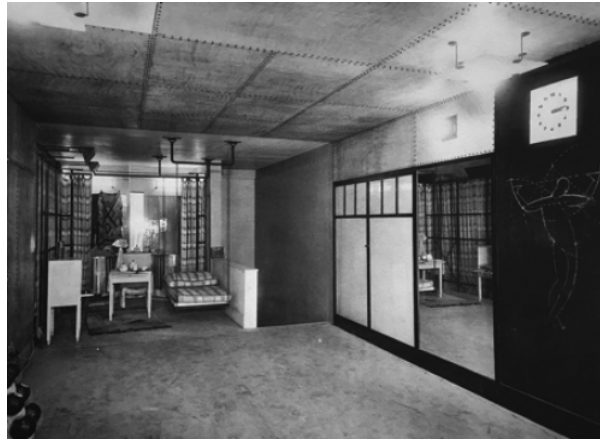
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## ABSTRACT

The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, which took place in Paris in 1925 and brought together the production of no less than twenty chiefly European nations, had the specific goal of demonstrating the excellence of French know-how. A number of the pavilions built for this occasion featured abundant luxury, with productions seeking to simultaneously be modern while presenting an inspiration drawn from the major styles from the French past. The event cannot, for all that, be reduced to this ostentation and the so-called traditionalist trends of Art Deco, as demonstrated particularly by the productions from creators with more modernist designs. Foreign contributions to the exhibition were often marked by a local inspiration that underscored the increasing affirmation of identity in Europe.



Maurice Dufrène, Small Sitting Room, A French embassy pavilion from the Société des artistes décorateurs, The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925. Source : A French Embassy, organized by the Société des artistes décorateurs, Paris, C. Moreau, 1925, pl. X.



Pierre Chareau, Lounge and Francis Jourdain, Physical Fitness Room, A French Embassy pavilion from the Société des artistes décorateurs, The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925. Source : A French Embassy, organized by the Société des artistes décorateurs, Paris, C. Moreau, 1925, pl. XLIII.

The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, which took place in Paris in 1925 and was part of a larger display of luxury, undoubtedly contributed to the highly elitist vision ascribed to the Art Deco movement, which spread in Europe from the 1910s until the outbreak of the Second World War and even beyond. However, this event partly originated in the breaking down of artistic barriers advocated by Art Nouveau at the turn of the twentieth century, at a time when the desire to apply modernity to all kinds of everyday objects also took on a social dimension, with the goal of artistic democratization. The desire to organize an event of this nature in Paris first appeared in a report submitted to the National Assembly in 1906. It was based on the model of the First International Exposition of Modern Decorative Arts that took place in Turin in 1902, which accepted only stylistically innovative productions. It was nevertheless in 1911 that the Union centrale des arts décoratifs, the Société des artistes décorateurs, and the Société d'encouragement à l'art et à l'industrie expressed to the government their wish that this event be organized in 1915. Postponed until 1916, and then deferred due to the outbreak of the First World War, the idea was taken up again after the conflict. Postponed to 1922 and then to 1924 due to delays in the project, the exhibition was finally inaugurated on April 28, 1925 by President Gaston Doumergue (1863-1937). Occupying a space stretching from the Esplanade des Invalides to the Grand Palais, and from the Place de la Concorde to the Pont de l'Alma, it brought together contributions from twenty chiefly European nations, and remained open until the fall. The vast majority of European countries were present during this major event, from Great Britain to the USSR and Sweden to Greece, along with Latvia, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands.

As later emphasized by the decorator Maurice Dufrène (1876-1955), the goal of the exhibition was to show the world French "creative genius" by "comparing all forms of knowledge and arts in their richest expressions," within a broader context of economic and artistic competition between European nations. According to him, this meant proving "to the broad public the economic usefulness of a revival of the applied arts, in continuity with the greats of the past in spirit, but beyond outdated formulas." That is why many of the pavilions built for this occasion featured abundant luxury in the arrangement of their interiors—asserting themselves as examples of French excellence in the decorative arts—for productions that sought to be modern, all while showing an inspiration drawn from the major French styles of the past. Among the most emblematic series in this ostentatious taste was l'Hôtel du collectionneur, which Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann (1879-1933) had built by Pierre Patout (1879-1965) and designed in collaboration with various creators, or the Musée d'art contemporain and the pavilion by the

locksmithing company Fontaine & Cie, both of which were designed by Louis Süe (1875-1968) and André Mare (1885-1932), the founders and directors of the Compagnie des arts français. The *Société des artistes décorateurs*, which was founded in 1901 to defend and promote the applied arts, enjoyed great success during the exhibition thanks to the vast program entitled *Une ambassade française* [A French Embassy] presented in the *Cour des métiers* [Courtyard of Artistic Trades] on the Esplanade des Invalides. A number of pieces were installed there, including the *petit salon* [small sitting room] by Maurice Dufrène, "*Chambre de Madame*" by André Groult (1884-1966), and the *antichambre* [anteroom] by Paul Follot (1877-1941), which were in keeping with the taste for modernized tradition, a taste present in the decorative production of other European countries as well.

One of the noteworthy characteristics of the exhibition of 1925 was the rather striking display of the links between art and commerce. For instance, the applied arts workshops of the Parisian Grands Magasins [major department stores] were highlighted in particular. They built imposing pavilions, such as the one by Henri Sauvage (1873-1932) and Georges Wybo (1880-1943) for Printemps's *Primavera*, by Joseph Hiriart (1888-1946), Georges Tribout, and Georges Beau for the Galeries Lafayette's *La Maîtrise*, by Louis-Hyppolyte Boileau (1878-1948) for the Bon Marché's *Pomone*, and by Albert Laprade (1883-1978) for the Grands Magasins du Louvre's *Stadium*. The interiors of these buildings were installed under the leadership of their respective artistic directors, Charlotte Chauchet-Guilléré (1878-1964), Maurice Dufrène, Paul Follot, and Étienne Kohlmann (1903-1988). The activity of these structures, of which *Primavera* was the first to be created in 1912, concretely enabled—all things being equal—the diffusion of decorative objects in the modern taste toward a broader public. It is nevertheless important to note that within the context of an exhibition aiming to demonstrate the grandeur of national know-how, the furnishings presented in these pavilions remained highly elitist. Similarly, dozens of boutiques with storefronts and interior layouts designed by a host of primarily French architects and decorators adorned the *Rue des boutiques*, arranged by Maurice Dufrène on the Alexander III bridge, as well as the *Galerie des boutiques*, designed by Henri Sauvage on the Esplanade des Invalides, although these stores essentially exhibited luxury products.

Still, it would be reductive to limit The International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts of 1925 to this ostentation and so-called traditionalist trends, which updated certain styles from the past. Of course the *The Pavilion of the Esprit Nouveau* designed by Le Corbusier (1887-1965), which was radical in its rejection of any kind of decor in favor of "equipment" for the residence that sought first and foremost to be functional, was initially sidelined from the event. Nevertheless, modernist trends asserted themselves in many other places within the exhibition, for instance in multiple spaces arranged within the pavilion entitled *Une ambassade française* [A French Embassy], precisely by certain creators who, four years later, left the Société des artistes décorateurs to found *l'Union des artistes modernes*. Francis Jourdain (1876-1958), who had espoused such an esthetic starkness since the 1910s, presented a smoking room as well as a physical culture room that perfectly met the concerns of the hygienists of his time. The hall for this ambitious program was entrusted to Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886-1945), who was also noted for the construction and design of the Tourism Pavilion. Finally, the office-library imagined by Pierre Chareau (1883-1950), today conserved at the Musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris, which is luxurious in its materials and still somewhat an heir to the past in its forms, proposed a highly innovative modularity of space, and emerged as a fully representative example of the porous borders between Art Deco and modernism.

Foreign contributions were very representative of the great esthetic heterogeneity featured by the event. For example, in the Cours la Reine, there was a fairly literal pastiche of ancient architecture proposed by the architect Armando Brasini (1879-1965) for the Italian pavilion, which stood next to the geometric rigor of the Soviet pavilions by Konstantin Melnikov (1890-1974), or those of Denmark by Kay Fisker (1893-1965) and Tyge Hvass (1885-1963). Other countries sought to promote a national culture specific to them through the evocation of a certain folklore, such as the Polish pavilion, which included a room adorned with paintings by Zofia Stryjeńska (1891-1976) representing scenes of local life and Slavic mythology, an example among many others of the increasing affirmation of identity in Europe.

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