The Shanghainese look back with nostalgia to the first flourishing of their city in the interwar period as their finest hour, when East and West mingled to form an eclectic dynamic new variant of Art Deco, the predominant international design form of the epoch. The 1920s to the 1940s was a period of exceptional economic and cultural vibrancy for Shanghai as the city grew in the space of a few years from a sleepy rural backwater to the world's fifth-largest metropolis, a thriving commercial hub, which agglomerated ambitious young Chinese and as well as Western capitalists and adventurers. Fortunes were made, and much of the new money was invested in real estate architectural construction, with a large resulting demand for furniture and interior fittings.

In recent years, the city has largely been rebuilt, and much of the old housing stock has been destroyed, to the regrets of the aficionados of Shanghai Art Deco. In the process however, much beautiful furniture has been saved, and it is high-quality craftsmanship using noble materials, with a synthesis of Oriental and Western decorative motifs which place it firmly at the zenith of Shanghai's cultural and historical tradition.

**Art Deco in Shanghai**

Art Deco is an architectural and decorative-arts style, popular from 1910 to 1940, that is characterized by highly stylized natural and geometric forms and ornaments, usually strongly symmetrical. Some of the century's most significant artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Fernand Leger, Sonia Delaunay, and Wassily Kandinsky, produced work in the style, as did designers of furnishings, textiles, jewelry, and advertising. Art Deco themes were often classical motifs reduced to geometric stylizations. The term Art Deco, coined in the 1960s when interest in the style revived, was derived from L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes. This Paris exhibition of 1925 came midway in Art Deco's development and was a definitive display of the style. African sculpture and ancient Egyptian and Southwest American Indian arts all had their influence on Art Deco in this decade, as did Archaic Greek art. The Art Deco look is related to the Precisionist art movement, which developed at about the same time. Well-known artists within the Art Deco movement included Tamara de Lempicka, fashion illustrator Erte, glass artist Rene Lalique and graphic designer Adolphe Mouron (known professionally Cassandre). Art Deco emerged as a reaction to Art Nouveau. Its two forerunners were Charles Rennie Mackintosh of Scotland and Josef Hoffmann of Vienna. These men were reformers of the excesses of the Art Nouveau style, and their works in 1900 were an indication of what was to appear in the next decades. Hoffman's austere Palais Stoclet in Brussels (1905-11), with its mosaic murals by Gustave Klimt, was surprisingly advanced for its time, and it marked the transition from Art Nouveau to Art Deco. In 1903 Hoffman founded the Wiener Werkstatte, a workshop that produced some of the earliest Art Deco designs.

With the influence of the Bauhaus and the International Style after 1925, Art Deco arrived at a final development that reflected the industrial age, thus achieving a reconciliation of the arts and machine production that had troubled artists and designers since the Industrial Revolution began.

Art deco influenced every aspect of contemporary design, from architecture to interiors, furniture, automobiles, locomotives, aeronautics, clothing, glass, ceramics, lighting, timepieces, cookery, painting, sculpture, poster art, publishing and book binding, contributing in the process to the genesis of the spirit of an epoch.
Thanks to modern mass communications technology already in existence at the beginning of the 20th century, Art Deco quickly spread its influence from West to East and around the globe, becoming synonymous with fashion and modernism.

Both practical and stylish, it satisfied so completely the demands of modern life, fashion and culture that ever since it superseded, it has been constantly revisited, revived, re-evaluated and renewed.

By the 1940s, Shanghai was a large bustling city, incorporating foreign concessions with a mixture of Chinese and international administration. It was a completely westernised 20th century city, with modern lighting, gas supplies, sewage systems, telephone, finances, securities and banking.

More than ideologies, modern lifestyles and morality pervaded the city and seeped out into the surrounding country. A new city, Shanghai culture distinguished itself from that of its older neighbours, and incorporated the influences of Western missionaries, modern industry and commerce. Western architects brought a variety of architectural style to the city, including Renaissance, neoclassical and Baroque. As the city and its Western community grew, more and more Chinese people came into contact with Western lifestyles and thinking, and began adopting them, wearing Western clothes, drinking coffee, eating Western food, using rickshaws etc. At the same time, after 1890 Shanghai was already the centre of China’s publishing industry and every major magazine was headquartered here. This attracted a large number of writers, artists, actors and intellectuals to settle in Shanghai. Peking and Guangdong opera stars, Hollywood film production companies, theatre companies from all over the world, every kind of dance hall, art school or music school, and every kind of Church and University sprang up in Shanghai, and added to this came the influence of the May Fourth movement which liberated Chinese intellectuals to think and write in new ways, leading to a newer, freer Chinese culture in Shanghai.

In 1927, the Kuomintang government made Shanghai a Special City, marking the true birth of Shanghai. The city’s administrative boundaries were expanded and now covered 630 square kilometres. In the 1920s and 30s, Shanghai was already a prosperous city with well-developed transport, a mature city administration, a lively media reporting on its rapid development and an ever increasing population drawn from all over the world.

There were peasants and workers, landlords turned capitalists, new factories, office buildings, foreign banks, shops, restaurants, entertainment complexes, hospitals, churches and schools, and Western-style accommodation springing up at a rapid rate. A number of major avenues began to specialise in particular activities, for example the Bund with its financial centre, Nanjing Street with its shops, Jiujiang Road with its early stock exchange, Hankou Road with its bars and Fuzhou Road with over a hundred publishing houses and antique shops all on one street. So much commercial activity stimulated residential real estate developments, and in the short period between 1910 and 1918 alone, over 4000 Western-style apartment blocks were built.

In 1928 the Hungarian architect L.E. Hudec (1893 to 1958) oversaw the completion of what at the time was considered to be Asia's finest theatre, Shanghai's Grand Theatre. In 1934, he completed The Park Hotel, Asia's highest building, which was influenced by the Empire State building in New York in its "stepped" design, and was replete with Art Deco motifs.
A number of overseas-trained Chinese architects mixed Western-style art deco with Chinese influences, to synthesise a new “Shanghai Art Deco.” style of architecture, which can be seen in the 1937 Bank of China building, designed by English-trained architect Lu Qianshou, or in the 1933 Shanghai Palace, designed by US-trained architects Zhao Shen and Chen Zhi. In the 1930s and 40s, Shanghai architecture received fresh impetus as the city's population surged to 6 million, making it the world's fifth largest metropolis, after London, New York, Tokyo and Berlin. In 1942, over 150,000 foreigners from more than 42 countries were registered as resident in the city. Shanghai had become the crossroad of the world in terms of art and design and the Shanghai's internationalised Art Deco design style was adopted throughout the city. Shanghai and Art Deco's breadth can be seen in the variety of projects, such as The Shanghai building, the Bacardi apartments, the Heng Shan Hotel, the Hamilton Building (now known as the Fuzhou building), the Hua Mao Apartments, (now known as Jin Jiang Hotel), The Bank of China building, -there are over a hundred well-known examples throughout the city. A similar synthesis can be seen in can be seen in two other great 20th century Asian cities: Tokyo and New Delhi. These cities also developed their own unique derivation of Art Deco, mixing local traditions with French style.

Characteristics of Shanghai Art Deco style and furniture.

Since the Ming and Ching Dynasty's, Suzhou furniture was recognised nationally within China as being the best that Chinese artisans could produce. Western businessmen and scholars both collected Chinese Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty furniture and published books on the subject as well as importing foreign furniture into China. Later Ching Dynasty furniture had already begun to absorb Western motifs and by the Republican era a synthesis of East and West can be seen. One important example of this, which was also a milestone in Shanghai furniture history was the opening in 1871 of the Tai Chang furniture store in Ningbo, selling Western-style wooden furniture. With stylistic influences echoed from around the world and an ever-growing foreign and local population, Shanghai became a truly cosmopolitan city. A large amount of Western-style architecture was built which needed to be furnished and decorated, so that in the 1920s and 30s furniture production in Shanghai flourished, and English, French, German and American businessmen and furniture designers set up shop in the city, as well as a number of large furniture stores. With the advent of modern furniture production technology, new materials such as plywood and chemical glues began to be employed. By 1946, there were over 100 Western-style furniture shops in the city, and Western furniture was all the rage. Up until the 1920s, Chinese furniture designers merely imitated a variety of Western furniture styles, but by the 30s and 40s, the synthesis of East and West that we call Shanghai Art Deco had emerged, producing functional furniture with local materials suitable for the requirements of modern life.

Western culture had to adapt itself to the peculiarities of Shanghai's terrain as Western furniture manufacturers fought over the local market. In 1932, French-trained designer Zhong Huang opened and furniture shop on Hua Hai Road with the slogan "Western style adapted for Chinese uses."

Art Deco design typically incorporates fine materials, excellent craftsmanship, with fluid lines and a-symmetrical geometric forms. Influenced by mechanical aesthetics and automobiles culture, rectilinear and semicircle motifs are widely employed. Furniture feet are often
semicircular, reflecting the influence of automobile wheels. Modern architectural forms, in particular the skyscraper, also influenced, with their trapeziums and stepped geometric forms. Inspired by Cubism, chairs and tables were designed to be asymmetrical. With precise, rational proportions, and a balance between function and ornamentation, popular motifs such as pyramids, sun rays, lightning bolts and straight lines, were mixed with traditional Chinese vignettes such as grapes, pomegranates, lotus flowers and fortune-bringing cranes. The overall arrangement shows a Constructivism which resonates with ornamentation, asymmetry and sympathetic arrangement of wood and metal.

With the introduction of Western furniture manufacturing techniques, mortise and tri-mortise joinery began to be used, making for easier transportation. Hinges were replaced by hidden hinges and wooden handles by metal ones. Sprung upholstery changed people’s concept of the chair. Plywood, a new material, was used a lot, facilitating the adoption of parquet, fillet, and mosaic decorative crafts. Ground glass, colored glass, colored ceramic tiles and marble were also used. To Chinese lacquerwork techniques, the furniture maker added the use of western shellac and varnish. Lighter and darker tones of wood were combined into two-tone designs, sometimes emphasised with painted outlines. Due to the popularity of redwood, other woods were sometimes tinged red in imitation. Wood texture was highly valued, and different words were valued for different uses. Camphor wood was often used to line mahogany furniture due to its insecticidal aroma. The most expensive furniture was made of the mahogany and boxwood, but rosewood, teak, willow and beech were also used widely. Teak furniture was most popular with Shanghai’s foreign residents. For chair and sofa cushions, velvet, cowskin, leather, silk and printed textiles were used.

Shanghai Art Deco furniture was made for the bedroom, dining room, sitting room, bank, office, and church. Although wood was usually used, there is also some metal furniture. The furniture is of great variety and includes desks, dinning tables, beds, cabinets, dressing tables and chairs. From Shanghai, Art Deco furniture spread to other cities such as Nanjing, Ningbo, Wuhan, Tianjing, Guangzhou, Hongkong and other parts of China.

During the Sino-Japanese war, Shanghai was an island, isolated by Japanese occupation, and no more mahogany could be shipped from India and Thailand. Furniture makers innovated with mahogany veneers, cut from recycled mahogany. Other wartime trends include two-sided soft cushions, with one side made of hard wood or bamboo for summer and spring and the other side made of leather or velvet for autumn and winter. The 蹼 adder chair? was genuine Shanghai innovation; with a hinge in the middle, it could be folded back to form a ladder.

Majong gambling tables are icons of culture in Shanghai. A Majong table has four drawers that contain the Majong blocks, and a three-layer cabinet located at foot of the table, with a first layer for ash trays, a second layer for cigarettes and matches and a third layer for glasses. Hidden metal locks in desk drawers and a variety of hidden metal buckles also embody the ingenuity of Shanghai Art Deco designers.

The Art Deco movement had a pervasive impact on Shanghai. Art Deco designers were drawn to powerful Chinese motifs found in ancient bronzes, to elegant shapes in ceramics and to the simple lines of hardwood furniture.

The result is an eclectic mix of traditional Chinese and modern international tastes that reflects Shanghai’s transition to the modern world. Seen retrospectively from the present, Shanghai
Art Deco was the classical period of Shanghai Art and design. It continues to inspire us today in our quest to create a new, modern, style of design adapted to life in 21st-century Shanghai.