

Twentieth Century Design:

by Harold Kellar

World War I saw the end of the Arts & Crafts Movement, both in England and America. As the world watched, Europe moved ahead into Modern Design. The year 1906 brought the opening of the Armory Show, the major landmark in the beginnings of modern art, to New York, and the final issue of Gustav Stickely's *The Craftsman*. These two events symbolized the passing of the old order and the beginning of the new. The most important contribution of the Arts & Crafts period—one that is not always acknowledged—is the elevation of furniture and the decorative arts to a level more closely aligned with the fine arts.

Sixty years ago, Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann was the star attraction at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs. A World's Fair-size show, the 1925 Paris Expo popularized the collective styles that we now call Art Deco. That much abused and maligned term—Art Deco—drawn from the title of the show, is frequently used to describe any object remotely modern that was built between 1920 and 1940. Ironically, Art Deco has come to mean anything brashly modern, while the Expo itself was overwhelmingly geared to traditionalism. In spite of these apparent contradictions, the

innovations in both designs and materials presented at the Expo makes the show pivotal to any study of Twentieth-century design.

Modernism (in the Bauhaus sense) was hardly considered, but nearly all of the exhibits were modern in the popular sense. Traditional techniques and materials were flaunted by one designer after another, most of whom considered Modernism as a surface veneer to be applied to an unchanging fundamental design philosophy. Designers luxuriated in the exoticism of their materials: lacquer, rare woods and leathers, elaborate, decorative carving, inlay and rare metal hardware were the obvious features of the French designers.

Art Deco style dominated Europe and America in the years between the World Wars. From Paris the styles of Art Deco spread outward until a form of decorative modernism, albeit of a very debased nature, was to be found in practically every corner of Europe and America. Dur-



Jacque-Emile Ruhlmann



This 1919 desk shows Ruhlmann's mastery of detail. With its spectacular amboyna veneer, ivory pulls and inlay, and torpedo legs, the David-Weil desk is quintessential Ruhlmann. The chair design, where the back rail, arms, and legs are combined in one sweeping and surprisingly sturdy curve, also appeared in numerous versions throughout Ruhlmann's career.

ing those decades Art Deco's aesthetic was ubiquitous, influencing everything from skyscrapers to salt and pepper shakers. Much of the furniture was modern in a decorative, cutting-edge sense, but its modernity was essentially superficial.

Art Deco rapidly became universal because it was presented in a popular format. Its decorative features could be applied with equal success to radios, cabinets, clocks, chairs, or bathroom fixtures. Today, after years of neglect, designers and furniture makers are taking a fresh look at Art Deco and particularly the work of Ruhlmann, which is inspiring both for its elegant lines

and master craftsmanship.

It was the Twenties and the war was over. This was an era hungry for glamour, romance and luxury. The strains of Gershwin and jazz, lavish entertaining, l'esprit moderne, and a certain joie de vivre attitude pervaded the designs of architecture, art and home furnishings. This was especially true of the Paris of the 1920s. No one better exemplifies this feeling than Ruhlmann.

Ruhlmann looked to the past for his motivation. French Neoclassicism was his inspiration, and his pallet was the colors of natural wood veneers accented with ivory, silver, and other exotic materials. He became

known for this restrained use of color. In contrast, some other observers believed the basis of Art Deco design was color and novelty. Compared with Ruhlmann's mature work, the polychromatic, jazzy work of the other major designers of the period appears to be bizarre in form and garish in color. Adventurous but traditional design, combined with exotic and luxurious materials, were the hallmarks of Ruhlmann's work. His high standards of design and execution made him one of the greatest French designers of this period.

While most of the emphasis in Twentieth century design has been on exposing it to as many people as possible, the work of Ruhlmann was aimed to as few people as possible. Early in the Twentieth century, furniture began to look modern in the sense of being unadorned. The Viennese architect Adolf Loos's assertion that "ornament is crime" became the voice of a movement toward greater simplicity of design. This simplicity became a natural advantage in creating good designs that were mass-produced to supply the growing middle class with quality goods that were fairly priced.

Ruhlmann hated the simple designs of the Arts and Crafts furniture popular at the turn of the century (see March 1996, [PFM](#)) and attacked it as "puritanical." He had no time for the Socialist ideas of William Morris and the utopian dreams of the Modern Movement (see September 1996, [PFM](#)). He established his case in an interview in 1920: "A clientele of artists, intellectuals, and connoisseurs of modest means is very congenial, but they are not in the position to pay for all the research, the experimentation, the testing that is needed to develop a new design...Only the very rich can pay for what is new and they alone can make it fashionable...Fashions don't start among the common people. Along with satisfying a desire for change, fashion's real purpose is to display wealth." Accordingly, Ruhlmann set out to woo the wealthy away from costly veneered antique furniture, and toward costly veneered modern furniture. He succeeded. His success was so spectacular that this was the only era in modern times when the most expensive new furniture was priced higher than the most expensive antiques. Ruhlmann became a celebrity, moving in wealthy circles.

Legend has it that he was a great wood craftsman, but he probably never made any furniture in his life. He was not a trained cabinet maker. He grew up in his family's highly successful painting and decorating business,

and even apprenticed as a decorator with other firms. In 1907, Ruhlmann took over the family business, but when World War I ended, he left the management of the flourishing house painting operation, which employed 500 people, to a partner. He

set up his own business as an ensemblier, a designer of interiors, including furniture, wallpaper, lighting fixtures, fabrics, and rugs.

Although he was famous in the 1920s for his furniture, he ran an interior decorating and design studio, not a cabinet shop. He contracted other cabinet shops to execute his designs until 1923 when he set up his own shop. He employed six to eight cabinet makers and installed the latest, most sophisticated machinery, including spraying equipment for the then new nitrocellulose lacquer. Employing the same rationale as the designers he despised, he remarked, "Nothing that can be made by machine should be made by hand." He noted that modern furniture relied on its decorative effects: not carving, but veneering of plain carcasses that were easily built by machine. Meanwhile, the 500 house painters labored on, providing the income to allow Ruhlmann and his craftsman to continue.

At his peak, Ruhlmann's in-house furniture making was divided between two workshops employing more than 48 people, including 27 cabinet makers (who spent most of their time cutting and applying veneers) and a dozen upholsterers. The sad fact was that although his furniture commanded the highest prices, it was not profitable. Some times he sold a piece below cost rather than



This amboyna armoire of the mid-1920s is one of a series of such pieces made over a number of years. Fine ivory lines are inlaid in the doors and the sides, and the door curve gracefully across their width.

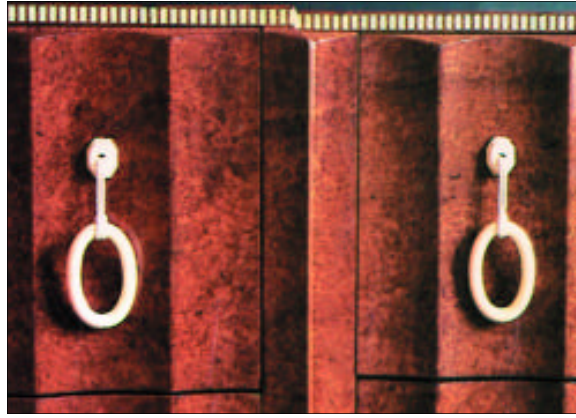
lose the opportunity to make it. His innovative art furniture included such details as the torpedo leg, which required 60 hours of labor to craft.

Finely made furniture was not hard to find in the Paris of Ruhlmann's day, as there were plenty of furniture makers that were capable of producing top-quality work. What set his work apart was not the construction, but the fineness of the furniture's design and its decoration. Ruhlmann loved perfection; the chamfering of a hidden rail was not superfluous. When he called Jules Deroubaix, one of his best cabinet makers, over from the shop, it was not to get technical

advise, but to make certain that the construction of a piece was conforming exactly to his demands. "Your craft is holding you back!" Ruhlmann would reply to each of Deroubaix's objections. Years later Jules admitted that almost always, Ruhlmann was right. "We might work for weeks on the same elaboration, the same detail, until we got exactly the desired effect. His eye was infallible."

How Ruhlmann and his men created their masterpieces can be glimpsed from drawings that survive today. A good example is the design and execution of the desk, in 1919, for David David-Weil, a well-known French collector of Eighteenth-century art. Weil was accustomed to working on what was known as a Carlton House table. These tables were kidney-shaped with a superstructure of drawers and pigeonholes. From Ruhlmann he wanted a writing table of modern design that would fit in with his Eighteenth-century collection and allow him to arrange his papers the way he was used to.

As usual, Ruhlmann was up to the task. The most striking transformation of form and design was the integration of the two separate elements; the marrying of table to superstructure. In Eighteenth-century designs, the separateness of these parts was emphasized by the use of moulding, and by setting the top back from the edge



Ruhlmann's 1914 sideboard is amboyna veneer over a solid oak carcase. No single member runs from end to end of the cabinet, yet the construction is rigid.

of the table. Ruhlmann made the sides of the table and the superstructure continuous, and streamlined the front of the superstructure so that it would echo the table's kidney shape, flowing the curve of the front seamlessly into the sides. More subtly, Ruhlmann used ornamentation to help unify his design. The ivory mock-dentil edge of the writing surface stops at the junction of the table and the superstructure rather than continuing along the sides and around the back as on an Eighteenth-century table.

A table bounded by a continuous curve presents the problem of how to attach the legs. The typical Eighteenth-century solution was to mount tapered

legs of square section with their outer faces tangent to the curved surfaces and slightly proud of the apron, their top edges abutting the underside of the overhanging table top. Ruhlmann's desk does not have an overhanging top and, moreover, is so thoroughly curvilinear that square legs would look out of place. His solution was faceted torpedo legs, a form that he seems to have invented. Round enough in section and curved enough in profile to harmonize with the design, they are sufficiently narrow that they do not disrupt the rhythm of the vertical ivory lines. Like Gothic arches, they force the eye upward, coming to a full stop with a small ivory sphere, which also sets the height of the drawer pulls. It is very rational. Ruhlmann built furniture to be used, not just to be looked at.

Beyond all of this it may be instructive to ponder Ruhlmann the businessman. He cultivated a clientele willing to pay the highest prices, not for art masquerading as furniture, but for furniture itself. ■

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