

# ART DECO TEA SETS AND COCKTAIL SETS MAKING MODERNITY ACCESSIBLE

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Abstract: This essay examines American Art Deco tea sets and cocktails sets and their accessibility to a large audience. It covers the origin of Art Deco and describes certain common features by visually analyzing relevant examples. It argues that Art Deco tea sets and cocktail sets blended aspects of modern and traditional design in order to appeal to progressive and conservative consumers. The designers studied include Jean Puiforcat, Norman Bel Geddes, Virginia Hamill, Gene Theobald, Louis W. Rice, Russel Wright, Howard Reichenbach, and Walter von Nessen.

## Art Deco Tea Sets and Cocktail Sets Making Modernity Accessible

Art Deco debuted in the 1920s and continued to be popular in design for several decades. Clean lines, symmetry, and lack of ornamental details all characterize this bold style (see figures 1 and 5 for examples). Geometric forms based on machines, such as circles, rectangles, spheres, and cylinders, are typical elements. When color is used, it is bright and high contrast. Art Deco was a branch of modernism, a cutting-edge art style, and it also celebrated the scientific advances and rise of the machine associated with modernity during the Interwar Period. Art Deco takes its name from the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris, where it first appeared. Bevis Hillier, an English art historian, started the widespread use of the title “Art Deco” to apply to this distinctly modern style in his 1968 book, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*.<sup>1</sup>

Art Deco grew out of the previously popular Art Nouveau, a style that utilized undulating curved lines, organic shapes, flowery motifs, and intricate details, but eventually grew to be its antithesis. The natural forms of Art Nouveau gave way to the machined appearance of Art Deco. Hillier describes Art Deco as “a classical style...like neo-classicism but unlike Rococo or Art Nouveau, it ran to symmetry rather than asymmetry, and to the rectilinear rather than the curvilinear; it responded to the demands of the machine and

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<sup>1</sup> Bevis Hillier, *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*, (London: Studio Vista Limited, 1968), 11.

new materials...and its ultimate aim was to end the old conflict between art and industry...by adapting design to the requirements of mass-production.”<sup>2</sup> Since the industrial revolution, machines ingratiated themselves more and more into the artistic world. Art Deco embraced this trend and quickly became a symbol of modern industry.

The fine arts, such as painting and sculpture, were influenced by Art Deco, but much of its legacy lies in the decorative arts. Industrial designers in the United States and Europe were able to bring this proclivity for modern innovation out of the factory and into the home. They made accessible designs that allowed Art Deco furniture and accessories to be found in every room of the house. Even tea sets and cocktail sets were a large part of this progression towards modernism.

Art Deco tea and cocktail sets were the epitome of modern design in the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, for all their modernism, many sets also appealed to more conservative buyers and could coexist with older styles of living. I believe that this mixture of new and old accounts for the success of the style in the United States. Art historian Alastair Duncan articulates this well when he says “Art Deco was in reality a pastiche of styles, an unlimited and sometimes contrasting mix of traditional and modern artistic impulses that defies precise definition.”<sup>3</sup> Designers drew inspiration from many sources, including cubism, futurism, American Indian art, French

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<sup>2</sup> Hillier, *Art Deco*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Alastair Duncan, “Art Deco (1920-1940),” *Modernism: Modernist Design 1880-1940*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 1998), 178.

design, and more.<sup>4</sup> This mix of styles that spans a broad spectrum is what made Art Deco so appealing to a wide variety of consumers. Trendsetters could revel in their modern and chic taste, while unadventurous buyers could update their home with clean and simple design. This variety was what made Art Deco attractive to so many people. Tea sets and cocktail sets exemplify this trend of accessibility.

I examine the accessibility of American Art Deco tea sets and cocktail sets by visually analyzing objects that I believe exemplify this trend. Several of the objects investigated are held locally in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, some of which were originally part of the collection of modern design of the Norwest Corporation (now Wells Fargo). There are several recurring factors that support my claim. These factors include representations of skyscrapers and modern life, new materials, a demand for affordability, functional style, space efficiency, influences from other cultures, and reinterpretation of tradition.

Material culture includes a wide range of objects, including tea and cocktail sets, which can help historians understand aspects of the culture the objects were produced in. Jules David Prown, professor in the History of Art department at Yale University, defines material culture as “the study through artifacts of the beliefs – values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society at a given time” and also the artifacts

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<sup>4</sup> Hillier, *Art Deco*, 13.

themselves.<sup>5</sup> He goes further, saying “the underlying premise is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged.”<sup>6</sup> Designs for consumer products offer historians insights into the minds of the artist or designer, but also the intended audience. Kenneth Ames, Professor at Bard Graduate Center, states that “by concentrating less on the unique and more on the typical [scholars] hope to compile an account of the past which is more responsive to contemporary needs.”<sup>7</sup> He also recognizes that “the commonplace artifacts of everyday life mirror a society’s values as accurately as its great monuments.”<sup>8</sup> The fine arts are very informative about certain aspects of culture, but decorative arts are often overlooked, though they can be better for interpreting how artistic movements are brought to a larger public. Art Deco started as an elite movement but trickled down until it was widely accessible and incorporated into many mediums. Tea and cocktail sets are a very specific category of objects that are used almost exclusively for entertaining, but they provide examples of the features that make Art Deco accessible.

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<sup>5</sup> Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,”

*Winterthur Portfolio* 17.1 (1982): 1.

<sup>6</sup> Prown, “Mind in Matter,” 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth L. Ames, “Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America,” in *Common Places: Readings in American Vernacular Architecture*, ed. Upton Dell et al. (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), 241.

<sup>8</sup> Ames, “Meaning in Artifacts,” 241.

Everything shown in the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* had to be completely original, rather than the reproductions of previous styles that was common at earlier fairs. The United States did not submit anything to the fair because a panel of advisors to President Herbert Hoover claimed that there was no modern design in America.<sup>9</sup> This new rule for the exhibition spurred the creation of many interesting and innovative objects. American visitors to the Paris exhibition were entranced; two faculty members from Indiana University, W.H. Scheifley and A.E. du Gord, noted during their visit in 1925 that the designers and architects had discarded “the entwining algae, gigantic vermicelli, and contorted medusas” of Art Nouveau for the “inorganic figures of geometry and geology – bodies bounded by plane surfaces.”<sup>10</sup> They also theorized that “some enthusiasts...sought in this new style of ‘simplicity and scientific technique’ a harmonious reconciliation of ‘art and mechanism.’”<sup>11</sup> The exhibition set the stage for the era of Art Deco and the modern designs it incorporated, and it launched an international trend that combined influences from all over the globe.

Jean Puiforcat was a preeminent French silversmith who exhibited some of his works at the 1925 Paris exhibition. He influenced American

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<sup>9</sup> J. Stewart Johnson, *American Modern 1925-1940: Design for a New Age* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), 9-10.

<sup>10</sup> W.H. Scheifley and A.E. du Gord, “Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts,” *Current History* 23 (Dec. 1925), 360-62, as cited in Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 21.

<sup>11</sup> W.H. Scheifley and A.E. du Gord, “Paris Exposition of Decorative Arts,” 360-62.

designers with his clean and streamlined designs that depict the modern beauty that many strived to create. His works embody the aesthetics of the machine age, though he created his works by hand.<sup>12</sup> One of his tea sets has vessels that are flattened, pointed ovals with illusionistic glass handles and none of the accoutrements of traditional silverwork (figure 1). The combination of straight and curved lines is pleasing and the glass reflects the polished surface, focusing on form rather than ornamentation. Puiforcat was one of the first designers to show that traditional embellishments could be eliminated without sacrificing luxury, and his designs were an icon of modernity that were both austere and sumptuous.<sup>13</sup> They could be practical and elegant, while appealing to both progressive and conservative consumers. A 1929 *Vogue* article praised some of Puiforcat's designs as "restrained in feeling, dignified in treatment, and subtle in form...that may enhance any room, however conservative in tone," and that his sets "show the possibility of experimenting with the modern without danger of regretting the step or of finding ourselves possessing articles of merely passing interest."<sup>14</sup> Art Deco designs like this have survived the test of time and proved to be modern-looking, stylish, and streamlined almost a century later.

The characteristics of streamlined design include smooth, curved lines, tear-drop or "V" shapes, horizontal orientations, and lack of details. Though

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<sup>12</sup> "MIA Modernism: American Art Deco," Minneapolis Institute of Arts, accessed February 2013, <http://www.artsmia.org/modernism/m2intro.html>.

<sup>13</sup> "Hot water kettle, from a five-piece coffee and tea set," Minneapolis Institute of Arts, accessed April 2, 2013, <https://collections.artsmia.org/index.php?page=detail&id=4725>.

<sup>14</sup> "Features: Modern Tea-Sets." *Vogue* 74, no.1 (Jul 06, 1929), 55.

originally streamlining was intended for industrial objects, applying it to household items increased its popularity in the 1930s. Futurism was a precursor to streamlining that influenced Art Deco designers in Europe and the US. Based in Italy, Futurism focused on abstract forms and the evocation of momentum and dynamism. For those who lived in the city, the speed and movement praised by Futurists quickly became a part of modern life. In the Futurist Manifesto of 1910, Umberto Boccioni and his colleagues declare “that all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever, and of speed.”<sup>15</sup> While Art Deco does not employ the abstractions of Futurism, the Futurists helped popularize the modern ideals of speed and momentum, which would come to be embodied by Art Deco’s streamlined everyday objects. A teapot that would sit on a coffee table in a living room has no technical need to be streamlined since it is not creating air resistance, but popular modern design embraced the trend anyway. The “simplicity and standardization” of streamlining objects was aesthetically pleasing, though not necessarily functional, and symbolized “forward movement, industrial progress, and the hope for economic revival.”<sup>16</sup> Duncan also claims that because of the grim economy, designers’ “ultimate mission was to inspire confidence and create a market. Horizontal lines, rounded corners, sleek surfaces, bold typography and new technology...came

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<sup>15</sup> Umberto Boccioni, “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto”, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2001), 152.

<sup>16</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 229.

to typify modernistic design in the 1930s – all conveying a boundless faith in the power of the machine to make a better world.”<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Meikle, an American design historian, points out that “as a moral dimension to design, publicists and apologists repeatedly stressed the social benefits of progress, the social harmonies possible through intelligent direction of the machine, and the fitness of an environment made over in its image.”<sup>18</sup> These Art Deco designs were very successful to these connotations of improving society, and the promise of innovation kept consumers intrigued and on the lookout for the next design.

In the United States, the machine profile snuck into the home through service areas, such as the kitchen, rather than living areas, which tended to be more nostalgic with a mix of different styles of furniture.<sup>19</sup> The Depression caused most families to cut back, even those who were well off. One way to alleviate money woes was for the wife to perform household tasks, rather than hiring a maid or servant. Even though the intended aerodynamic effect of streamlining was not particularly relevant to the use of these objects, the smooth lines and lack of ornamentation not only made them striking, but also easier to clean, which was an unexpected benefit for housewives.

The rise of the city and machine aesthetics also became popular. The noise, speed, and fast pace of life associated with living in the city are

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<sup>17</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited: Industrial Design in America, 1925-1939* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 233.

reflected in these objects by their smooth faces and sharp edges. Art historian Alastair Duncan claims that skyscraper imagery became outdated during the Great Depression due to its connotations of “capitalism and unbridled entrepreneurship,”<sup>20</sup> though the examples studied here disagree. He claims that skyscraper imagery and streamlining were employed differently, but there are plenty of examples that involve both concepts.

The Manhattan Cocktail Set (figure 2), designed by Norman Bel Geddes for the Revere Copper and Brass Company, is a prime example of the expression of the city, and the modernity associated with city life, in common household items. Cities, especially skyscrapers, were glamorous and considered synonymous with science, innovation, and modernity and was thus a large trend in Art Deco designs. In this set, the tall shaker and cups mirror the verticality of skyscrapers and have clean lines with no superfluous details. Bel Geddes’ preference for streamlined design is espoused in this cocktail set. The cups have stems that are thin and spindle-like and the cups themselves are the same shape as the shaker cap, which highlights the uniformity available because of the ubiquity of machines. The set does not merely suggest an abstract thought of a city, but directly references New York in its title, and also recalls the cocktail that is named for the borough. Additionally, Bel Geddes started his career in theater and stage design before becoming an industrial designer, which is evident in the stepped, stage-like tray that enables the owner to arrange the cups in a miniature cityscape. In

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<sup>20</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 229.

his 1932 book on design, *Horizons*, Norman Bel Geddes states that “design in all objects of daily use that shall make them economical, durable, convenient, and congenial to every one.”<sup>21</sup> The cocktail set is stylish and contemporary, yet illustrates his point of appealing to a large audience. It is a set that is owned by several museums, including the Minneapolis Institute of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Yale University Art Gallery, which is a testament to its quality as well as its long-lasting appeal.

Despite not exhibiting at the 1925 Paris fair, ideas from the exhibition soon caught on in the United States, disseminated by magazines, department stores, and visitors to Paris. The Art Deco movement then grew very quickly and was widely popular by the late 1920s. Meikle observed that in 1925 “few observers would have thought Americans capable of designing mass production items in a style consciously reflecting modernity and technological progress.”<sup>22</sup> Yet Americans embraced Art Deco as a signal of the changing artistic atmosphere consistent with the social environment, and modern design flourished. Other modern art movements had made it to the US, but many had not broken out of the art world. Art Deco succeeded as a widespread phenomenon that became a part of people’s everyday lives.

Architecture was one of the first things to be influenced by the Art Deco style, as shown in buildings such as the Chrysler Building in New York City (1930) and the Foshay Tower in Minneapolis (1929). Its influence on household

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<sup>21</sup> Norman Bel Geddes, *Horizons*, (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1932), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Meikle, *Twentieth Century Limited*, 19.

goods followed soon after. American designers were inspired by avant-garde Europeans, but also formed their own brand of Art Deco that appealed to the oftentimes more conservative American market. The progression of modernism was uneven in the United States, and the US was slower to adopt trends than Europe, partially due to the country's "deep-rooted conservatism and corresponding resistance to change," in the words of Duncan.<sup>23</sup> Accordingly, the transition of the decorative arts into modernism was not an overnight process. In order for a designer to be successful in the United States, one needed to strike a balance between the modern and conservative if one wanted to appeal to both types of consumers.

Skyscrapers are readily associated with the city, but crowded apartments were also a reality. Virginia Hamill's tea service is made of squat cylinders situated in close proximity, mirroring that crowded feeling (figure 3). Gene Theobald's breakfast set takes this one step further, making the three pieces interlock and take up the space of just one (figure 4). With these designs and others, Theobald and Hamill emphasized this other aspect of the city – efficient use of space. The principles of streamlining and space efficiency go hand in hand, especially during the 1930s. Many people had to live on less money, which meant having to move to smaller homes or sell luxury items. Tea sets such as these allowed a traditional custom, entertaining, to be reformatted to fit with modern life. Tea sets needed to be updated to stay relevant and this reimagining kept them feeling fresh rather

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<sup>23</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 214.

than as an obsolete relic of the past. However, even though these items bring the issues of crowded cities and efficient use of space to mind, they are both silver-plated and thus would not have been a viable option for those actually suffering during the Great Depression. Both of these designs were for the International Silver Company in Meriden, Connecticut. The business was focused on mass production and hired outside designers, such as Theobald and Hamill, to propel the firm into the avant-garde.<sup>24</sup> They were at the forefront of design because other major silver manufacturers were hesitant to take leaps and did not produce modern designs until the mid to late 1930s.<sup>25</sup>

The “Apollo Skyscraper” teapot (figure 5), designed by Louis W. Rice of Bernard Rice’s Sons, is another item that makes direct reference to the city, but incorporates other influences as well. It is boxy, but the tall and cylindrical handle accentuates its height. The stepped top is reminiscent of some of the early stepped skyscrapers. Stepped or setback skyscrapers, sometimes with a tall tower, became popular in the Art Deco period due to a 1916 New York City zoning law that required air and light to reach the street.<sup>26</sup> The terraced top also bears similarities to Aztec and Mayan temples found in Central America, such as one found in Tikal, Guatemala (figure 6). The handle also looks like a smoke stack, furthering the industrial connotation. The Apollo teapot is an interesting mix between modern and

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<sup>24</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 226.

<sup>25</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 227.

<sup>26</sup> “About Zoning,” New York City Department of City Planning, accessed May 15, 2013, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/zone/zonehis.shtml>.

antique architectural themes. Americans were obsessed with modernism, but the discovery of King Tut's tomb in 1922 created an intense interest in ancient civilizations. The ancient Greek god Apollo is referenced in the title of this teapot. Apollo was a sun god, which further emphasizes the object's relation to the sky, and sunburst motifs were common in Art Deco objects across all mediums. Art Deco looked to the past *and* the future for inspiration, as evidenced by its eclectic conglomeration of elements from different time periods. This teapot presents a combination of ancient and contemporary sentiments that makes the statement that these distinct elements can be compatible in a modern world.

A Rosenthal brand sugar bowl and creamer also showcase the Aztec influence on Art Deco decorative arts (figure 7). The bold design is white, pink, and gold, with a black outline, and portrays a stylized bird, perhaps an eagle. The gold paint on the imported set reflects a sense of opulence and the exotic design allows the owner to seem like a world traveler. This resembles the transatlantic expatriates of the era who attempted to bridge multiple cultures and influences, but without the consumer having to leave their civilized, urban environment. Additionally, urban centers are often associated with great diversity, so this blending of influences from different times and places helps to further the notion of the city as a cosmopolitan atmosphere.

In addition to these new designs, new materials helped to further increase the modernity in these objects. This, in turn, promoted mass

consumption. Aluminum became popular and was used for many kitchen objects. It was used for both cooking and serving, due to its durability, conductivity, and lightness. Chromium was also affordable and fashionable. Bakelite and other early plastics are also present in many of these items, used mostly for small parts, such as handles or simple decorations. Aluminum or chromium with Bakelite looked similar to traditional materials, such as silver and ebony. However, they did not cost as much, and helped to meet the demand for affordability during the Great Depression. These new materials led to changes in the manufacturing process that allowed items to be both made well and remain affordable.<sup>27</sup>

The designs of Russel Wright are also an evocation of the city, but they have more curves and natural elements, so that urban symbolism is not the only component. A 1932 cocktail set (figure 8), made of aluminum and cork, is formed by perfect spheres and embodies the geometry that is common in modernistic designs. The cork provides a contrast to the bright aluminum, but serves a functional purpose as well, acting as built-in coasters on the cups and an insulating handle on the shaker. The globe-like base anchors the shaker, allowing the neck to reach taller heights, stirring up images of skyscrapers. Indeed one reviewer said that the “cylindrical and spherical forms are indicative of the speed of our age,” once again calling Futurism to

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<sup>27</sup> Richard J. Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome: The Chase Era* (Stamford, CT: Jo-D Books, 1988), VIII.

mind.<sup>28</sup> The cups are inverted versions of the shaker and the repetition of forms further emphasizes mass production. The lightweight materials make the set easily portable, a necessary feature for those constantly moving urbanites bustling about a party, and Wright boasts that “even the frailest hostess finds no difficulty in handling the larger pieces.”<sup>29</sup> All of these things make this a cocktail set that is beautiful and practical while appealing to a large audience. Additionally, the incorporation of natural materials disproves the common notion that nature and machine are dialectically opposed. This piece clearly shows that they can come together in harmony and foster a commitment to efficiency and clean lines. Although Wright designed his pieces to fit with modern decorative schemes and intended them to reach a wide audience, he created each piece by hand.<sup>30</sup> This led to variations between sets, perhaps implying that good design was still hard to mass produce at this time. Wright recognized that the Great Depression would lead to more informal entertaining and thus strived to design objects that had a functional elegance and were sturdy enough for cooking, yet pretty enough for serving.<sup>31</sup>

The Chase Brass & Copper Company was very influential in the world of Art Deco housewares. Located in Waterbury, Connecticut, the company

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<sup>28</sup> “Cocktail Set, Model 326,” Art Institute of Chicago, accessed April 2013, [http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/202820?search\\_no=1&index=8](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/202820?search_no=1&index=8).

<sup>29</sup> Typed caption for publicity photograph of “Maple handled server and tray,” c. 1933. Wright Archives, as cited in Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 91.

<sup>30</sup> “Cocktail Set, Model 326,” Art Institute of Chicago.

<sup>31</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 248.

produced many products for the United States government during World War I. After the end of the war, they lost the US government as their biggest client and needed a new customer base, so they moved to making metal objects for domestic use in the 1930s. However, at the advent of World War II, they started producing for the government again and did not resume producing household goods after the war. The Chase Era only lasted about a decade, but in that time the company “was a pioneer in the manufacture and distribution of mass-produced Art Deco-styled housewares, which the average person could afford to purchase.”<sup>32</sup> Though inexpensive, the products were not cheap, and were clearly meant for the middle class and above, who could afford to buy entertainment pieces beyond their everyday needs. The company produced an extensive selection of objects, including cocktail sets, tea sets, and coffee sets.

The Chase Brass & Copper Company was a big proponent of incorporating urban designs into their collection. Howard Reichenbach designed the Gaiety cocktail set for the company in 1933 (figure 9). It sold for \$9.00 per set (shaker, four cups, and tray) in the 1941 Chase Brass & Copper Company catalog.<sup>33</sup> Art historian Kristina Wilson remarks that this piece “evoked the towering monolith of modern skyscrapers in its silhouette.”<sup>34</sup> Even eighty years later, it is clear how Reichenbach was influenced by skyscrapers. The black enamel rings on the chrome plated copper are like the

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<sup>32</sup> Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome*, VII.

<sup>33</sup> Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Kristina Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 89.

rows of windows on tall office buildings, and the handle is like the spire present in some Art Deco skyscrapers, such as the Empire State Building. The enamel rings were also available in red or green, which makes the set all the more lively, and the bands act as neon lights, which was another new technology. The cups are hemispheres with squat, round feet, a lightweight and industrial revision of the traditional stemmed cocktail glass. They are more condensed and casual than elegant glassware, yet still have an air of sophistication that makes them appealing. The interplay of the short cups and the tall shaker might seem unconventional, but it reflects the dichotomy between older, small buildings and the massive, new skyscrapers that were popping up everywhere. Cartoonist Art Young comments on this phenomenon in *Nearer My God to Thee*, by depicting a church dwarfed by the massive skyscrapers that flank it (figure 10). Churches were traditionally the tallest buildings in a town, but with the advent of innovations that allowed buildings to reach higher heights, they were surpassed in favor of this show of progress and industry. Young uses humor to point out that the times were changing and that some people began to worship technology as the messiah of the modern age. The shaker is the star of the set and draws the attention of observers, just like skyscrapers were attractions for locals and tourists alike, with the surrounding objects being only a secondary concern. The catalog describes the shaker as “entirely modern in appearance” and the cups are

praised for having “the simplicity of line and decoration that suggests smartness and good taste.”<sup>35</sup>

Because of the Great Depression, the luxury of earlier times was not feasible. Despite the hard times, Americans still wanted to keep up appearances. This was still an option with mass produced items made from cheaper materials that proclaimed that the owner was stylish and modern. Nevertheless, the 1930s was a period rich with modern design, and some designs made subtle references to earlier American styles. Walter von Nessen, a German immigrant, designed the Diplomat Coffee Service for Chase Brass & Copper Company in 1932 (figure 11), and even though he drew on older themes, it is still a modern style. The set sold for \$15.00 in 1941, with the tray sold separately for \$3.00.<sup>36</sup> The coffee pot, creamer, and sugar bowl are all fluted and reference popular eighteenth and nineteenth century American forms, such as a Paul Revere tea set (figure 12). The color scheme is the same, but instead of using silver and ebonized wood, von Nessen employed chrome plated metal and Bakelite plastic, some of the aforementioned cheaper materials. Furthermore, von Nessen’s coffee set is updated by making it taller and more fluid, and it incorporates perpendicular handles. This set was another successful design for the company and was used in some movies and stage shows because the ribs “catch lights and

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<sup>35</sup> Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome*, 11.

shadows, and reflect them in beautiful patterns.”<sup>37</sup> Kristina Wilson observes that Chase items such as this coffee service echo classical forms by “grafting their newness onto the established respect for history and tradition.”<sup>38</sup> This is yet another example of combining the past and present for a modern look.

Von Nessen was not the only Art Deco designer to tap into Colonial America for inspiration. Journalist Edith Weigle stated in a 1936 article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* that Russel Wright “admires the inherent honesty of design of the early American period, a style determined by the necessities and exigencies of colonial times.”<sup>39</sup> Both Von Nessen and Wright recognized that the simplicity of colonial forms was still relevant to modern life and that this harkening back to an earlier era might recall the traditional American dream of working hard to be successful. Many of the hardships experienced during the Interwar period had precedents in American history and maybe the reminder of earlier generations’ success gave hope to those still feeling the effects of the Great Depression. These objects are able to utilize a long history of design and incorporate it into modern schemes that underlie the wide appeal of Art Deco.

Analysis of a Chase Brass & Copper Company advertisement in a 1934 edition of *House Beautiful* magazine helps to illuminate the interaction between these new designs and traditional dining values (figure13). Most

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<sup>37</sup> Kilbride, *Art Deco Chrome*, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, 92.

<sup>39</sup> Edith Weigle, “Russel Wright Translates America's Furniture Traditions Into Clean Cut Modern Design,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 23, 1936, d5.

American design firms relied on print advertising, rather than exhibitions at world's fairs, because they could reach a larger audience and stress name recognition, product quality, silverware as art, and its importance in daily life.<sup>40</sup> Chase Brass & Copper Company also advertised in *Good Housekeeping*, which was a very popular magazine of the day with a large reader base that exposed many people to their products. In the *House Beautiful* advertisement, the Diplomat Coffee Service and the Gaiety Cocktail Set are shown among the items in the dining scene, and two new trends of the time are showcased – the buffet party and cocktails. Because of the Great Depression, many people had to eschew traditional forms of entertainment, such as extravagant dinner parties. Instead, people hosted buffet parties that required less room than a formal seated dinner, as some newer homes had small or nonexistent dining rooms. This also required less work from the hostess and prevented the need to hire extra help. This type of entertaining was not affordable for everyone, but it was one way that a family could save money without making terrible sacrifices. A critic of new designs said in 1933 that “the modern designer has been ingenious in inventing new ways of doing things which suit our present sixty-mile-an-hour, no-time-but-much-to-see, type of living,” which is what the buffet party endorsed.<sup>41</sup> This revitalization of the old custom of a dinner party allowed for multiple interpretations that could be as modern as the host wanted, while

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<sup>40</sup> Duncan, *Modernism*, 240.

<sup>41</sup> “Contemporary Dining,” *A&D*, 40 (November 1933): 13, as cited in Wilson, *Livable Modernism*, 85.

still being conservative for those who preferred tradition. Additionally, cocktails gained popularity when the prohibition of alcohol mandated by the 18<sup>th</sup> amendment was repealed by the 20<sup>th</sup> amendment in 1933. Even in the midst of the Great Depression, companies tried to capitalize on the renewed legality of alcohol. They sold special types of glasses for specific drinks, yet they also tried to create objects that were affordable and appealed to a wide audience in order to create as wide of a market as possible. It is also interesting that the ad is selling Art Deco objects, but the style of the advertisement itself is not Art Deco. Often Art Deco figures are angular or overly muscular and sometimes even alien-looking with elongated proportions. Alternatively, this advertisement uses a style to appeal to many people by employing elegant and approachable figures and decorations that are not too lavish to be impractical for the intended audience.

Even the very small market of Art Deco tea sets and cocktail sets captured many Americans' obsession with modernity and its associations with the city. Yet these designs also incorporated qualities that were compatible with conservative values and traditional design and made Art Deco easily accessible to many people. Skyscrapers, French design, Aztec architecture, streamlining, and many other things influenced this unique style that appealed to people's yearning to bring modern design into their home. Additionally, the simple, geometric forms and uncomplicated designs made with cheaper materials played into the need for space efficiency and

affordability, which helped to further increase the popularity of Art Deco. The glory of the city and machine were proclaimed by the tall cylindrical cocktail shakers that mimic skyscrapers and the perfectly spherical cups in several designs, but adaptability to the new challenges of life in the Interwar period was also stressed. Many designers and companies helped to shape Art Deco and even though it has somewhat fallen out of favor, it continues to be appreciated and revived almost a century later.

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1. Jean Puiforcat, Tea and Coffee Set, 1925,  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts

2. Norman Bel Geddes,  
Manhattan Cocktail  
Set, 1939-41, Art  
Institute of Chicago



4. Gene Theobald, Breakfast Set,  
1928, Minneapolis Institute of Arts



3. Virginia Hamill, Tea Service,  
1928, Minneapolis Institute of Art





5. Louis W. Rice, Teapot for "Apollo Skyscraper" set, c. 1927, Minneapolis Institute of Arts



6. Temple I, Tikal, Guatemala, 8th Century CE, Photo by El Comandante



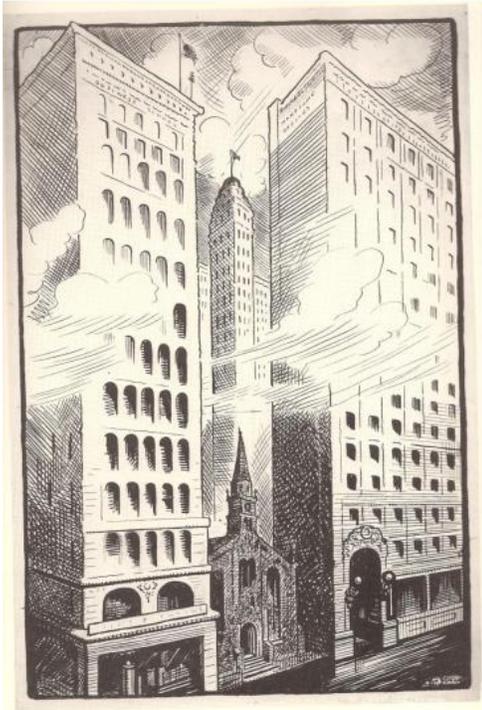
7. Rosenthal, Creamer and Sugar Bowl, 1915-20, Goldstein Museum of Design, Photo by the author



8. Russel Wright, Cocktail Set Model 326, 1930, Art Institute of Chicago



9. Howard Reichenbach, Gaiety Cocktail Shaker and Cocktail Cups, 1933, found in *Livable Modernism*



10. Art Young, "Nearer my God to Thee," The Masses, December 1913



11. Walter Von Nessen, Diplomat Coffee Service, 1932, found in *Livable Modernism*



12. Paul Revere, Tea Set, 1792, Minneapolis Institute of Arts



13. Ad for Chase Brass and Copper Co. in *House Beautiful*, May 1934, found in *Livable Modernism*