



# STILL IN STYLE

Art Deco celebrates its centennial this year. *Art & Antiques's* **DAVID MASELLO** examines the effect the movement first had on him in Chicago and how it affects him still in his long-adopted city of New York where the style is omnipresent.

**It's one of Chicago's most alluring sites:** the limestone façade of the Chicago Board of Trade Building as it fills the southern end of LaSalle Street. The 45-story, zig-zagging, multi-tiered building, completed in 1930, stands as one of the handsomest structures in the Loop, the downtown area so named for the El trains that circumnavigate the locale in

a giant oval. The dignified, even rakish, Art Deco edifice fascinated me as a boy growing up in and around Chicago, so much so that I wanted to work inside the building as a teenage messenger on the trading floor, during summer breaks in high school.

While I professed a quasi-desire to work in the financial industry that took place within,

what I discerned early on is that it was really all about my desire to work in the building—to occupy it during the day and be immersed in its Art Deco splendor. And when I got a job doing exactly what I had hoped for, I was able every morning during the summer months of my junior and senior high school years to whoosh through the revolving doors into the echoing three-story-high lobby to work as a floor messenger, carrying buy-and-sell orders to brokers. The task was both exciting and dreadful, working with the company's brokers who shouted and gesticulated madly with hand signals as they negotiated the futures prices of corn and wheat, oats and oil, and other commodities. They were rough and tough guys, smart about finance, but short on manners and nuance. I was surprised by their collective alpha-male crudeness and harshness. But how exciting it was to ride the El into the Loop every day from Evanston, enter that monumental building and don the required jacket that qualified me as an employee, someone able to enter the hallowed trading floor. From there, I could gaze up to the tourists looking down from a visitors' perch; I was one of their intended sites.

Now that I have lived in New York for more than 40 years, I recognize that the buildings that inspire me most in the city, the ones where I always feel a rush of enthusiasm when entering, are those built during the Art Deco era, which ran roughly from 1925 to the onset of World War II. Indeed, this year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the movement known as Art Deco. The style was launched in Paris on April 28, 1925, at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, and it is hard to believe



**CHICAGO BOARD OF  
TRADE BUILDING**



EMPIRE STATE BUILDING FAÇADE, NEW YORK

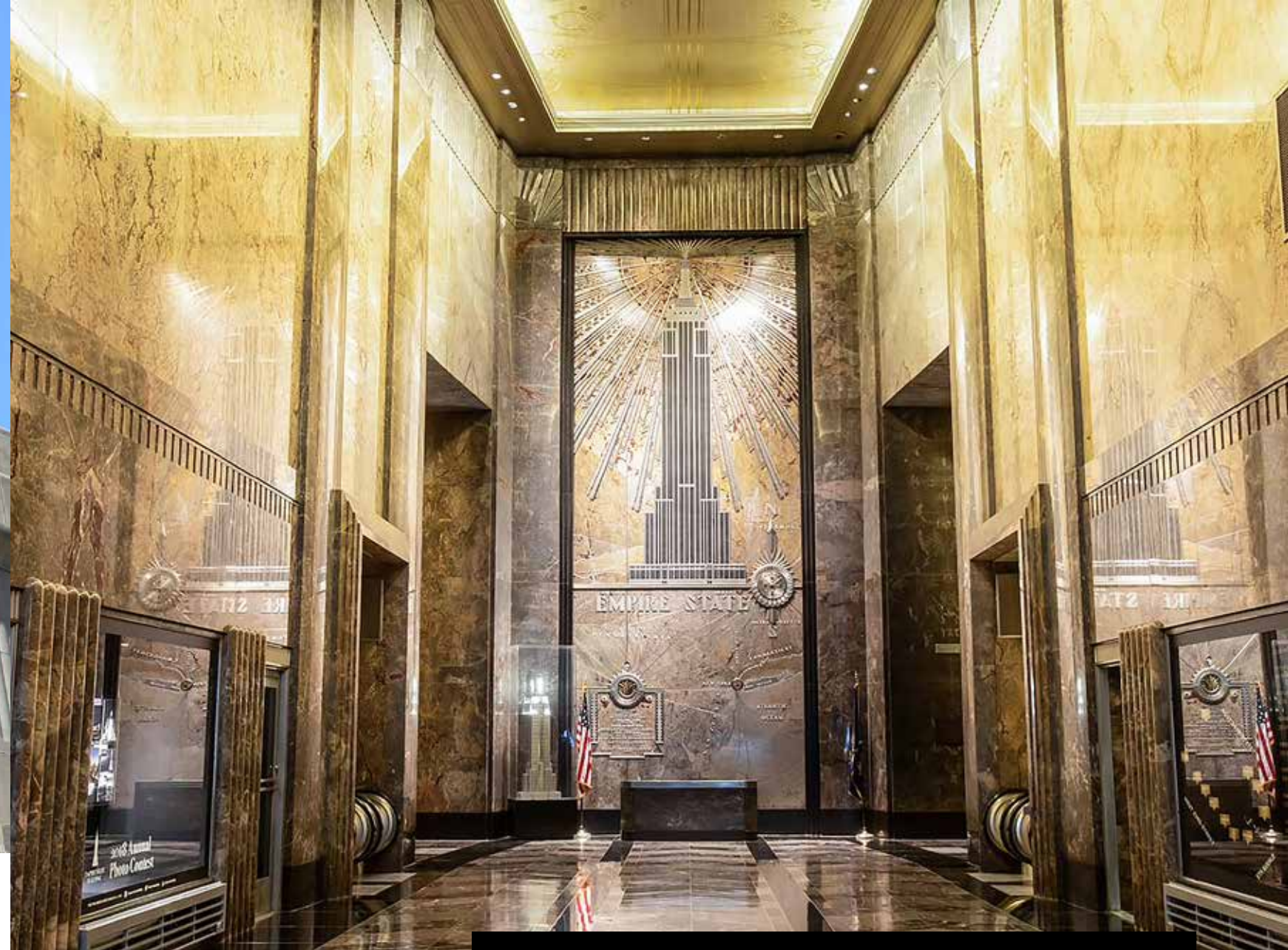
that the aesthetic that is so seemingly distant from what prevails now is something that occurred really not so long ago—and was part of everyday life then. After all, one of my late mother’s college friends is soon to turn 100 herself, and she performs still as a cabaret singer here in New York. She was born the same year Deco became a phenomenon (though the actual term was not coined until the 1960s).

There are many eras and layers of architecture that define the New York cityscape. Quiet blocks of 19<sup>th</sup>-century brick townhouses fill portions of Greenwich Village, while many side streets of the Upper West Side, as well as vast neighborhoods of Brooklyn, reveal themselves as neat, uninterrupted lines of Victorian and Edwardian-era brownstones. Opulent Beaux-Arts-style public buildings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, notably the Met Museum, New York Public Library, and Grand Central Station, maintain a dignified presence. Glass-curtained, minimalist 1950s and ’60s Modern skyscrapers march along Park Avenue. By the late 1970s and early ’80s, Postmodern buildings began to

rise throughout Midtown and downtown, their façades affixed with decorative period flourishes, best exemplified by the Chipendale-topped AT&T Building on Madison Avenue. A new and less definable, though thrilling, hybrid breed of buildings continues now to populate the skyline. Yet, the most striking buildings of all in the city—the ones tourists seek out, that stand out amid the density, and that embody a glamour that has otherwise faded from New York—are those built in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the Art Deco style.

Although the Great Depression halted much new construction following the stock market crash of 1929, most of the great Art Deco buildings arose during that era because the financing was already in place prior to the economic downturn. The 102-story Empire State Building was built in 1931 in a mere 14 months, from foundation to spire, and it remains the iconic building of Manhattan—perhaps even of the American skyscraper as a whole. Arising simultaneously eight blocks north was the Chrysler Building, at 100 stories, though it was finished earlier, in 1930; its silver ziggurat of a spire,

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EMPIRE STATE BUILDING INTERIOR, NEW YORK

embellished with monumental falcon heads, still pierces the sky. Meanwhile, the first structures in the several-building complex of Rockefeller Center were completed by 1932, representing the best assemblage of Art Deco structures in any American city.

You always know when you are passing an Art Deco building because of the sheer ornamentation, bas reliefs, and polychromatic friezes that appear on a façade. Often, one enters from the sidewalk through revolving doors made of a golden brass into an elaborately decorated marble lobby where no details or elements are left unattended. The lobby mailboxes, most now out of commission, are usually articulated as sculptural objects. Elevator doors are etched with designs, inside and out. Ceilings are emblazoned with murals that might depict city views as if witnessed from one of the era’s zeppelins.





CHRYSLER BUILDING, NEW YORK



I am grateful to live in a city with so many Art Deco masterpieces. Over the years I have been here, I have worked in some of those buildings, notably at Simon and Schuster in Rockefeller Center, where I was a young editor in the 1980s. Every day I felt empowered when entering the 21-story building on Sixth Avenue. There in the lobby is a miniature diorama concealed within an actual column. Peer through a small porthole window, press a button that lights up the interior, and you can see the final rivet that was pounded into the building in 1937.

The Art Deco style is a complicated one. It is visible most emphatically in urban, commercial architecture, but it is prevalent also in decorative objects of the era, such as tabletop items, in automobiles, trains, airplanes, ships, jewelry, fashions, furnishings, and artworks. Art Deco can be streamlined or highly decorated, just as it can assume organic forms or those that are rigorously geometric and rectilinear. Art Deco objects can be fash-



BULLOCK'S WILSHIRE, NOW SOUTHWESTERN LAW SCHOOL, IN LOS ANGELES

PHOTO BY ANTOINE TAVENEAU

ioned of expensive exotic woods and rare metals or inexpensive, mass-produced materials. Prior to the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel's closing for more than a decade as it undergoes changes, I used to walk through its block-long lobby to go from Park Avenue to Lexington Avenue, as a shortcut. I would traverse its two-story-high gleaming black-and-white Art Deco lobby, feel the mosaic tiles under my feet as I passed over an 18-foot-diameter creation depicting the six stages of life, admire the banks of decorated elevators, and take in in the Art Deco-inspired uniforms of the bellhops.

I wander still into the lobby of the Chrysler Building to use stairways to a subway line. The moment you enter the structure, you are immersed immediately in a cocoon of veined marble that appears to grow organically onto the walls, ceilings, and floor—a Lascaux-like cavern of design. I use the Lincoln Building, completed in 1930, on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street as another shortcut to 41<sup>st</sup> Street



ATLAS STATUE IN FRONT OF ROCKEFELLER CENTER, NEW YORK

because, I get to admire the arcade of glass-fronted storefronts that wind their way through the lobby.

The Art Deco style is mannered and highly tailored, and, for some, its appeal can be an acquired one, not unlike developing a taste for dry martinis or raw oysters on the half shell (foods that somehow belie the era). Few American cities are without their significant Art Deco landmarks. Think of the former 1929 Bullock's Wilshire department store in Los Angeles, the miles of Deco-era hotels and apartment buildings that line Miami's South Beach, train stations in Kansas City and Cincinnati, numerous office buildings in Detroit, Philadelphia, Boston, Cleveland. The Art Deco style emerged a century ago in Europe, assumed its own forms and manifestations in America, yet remains a visible and inspiring aesthetic today wherever it appears.

What I continue to remember most about my first glamorous job in downtown Chicago is my immersion in that style, from early morning to the end of the workday, and I live in a city now where the Art Deco aesthetic still surrounds and inspires me.

*For an ongoing series of events in and around New York that celebrate the centennial, visit the website of the Art Deco Society of New York (ADSNY), [artdeco.org](http://artdeco.org). The ADSNY, a non-profit organization founded in 1980, advocates for the appreciation, understanding, celebration, documentation, and preservation of Art Deco architecture, design, and culture in New York and around the world.* 📍