THE ARCHITECTURE OF DECO

9-12 Presentation Script

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Hello! My name is Miss Christine and I'm the teacher for *Documenting Deco*, an educational program for students like you. *Documenting Deco* is brought to you by the Art Deco Society of New York, or ADSNY for short. ADSNY is a nonprofit organization that celebrates the art and culture of 1920s and 1930s New York City and beyond.

What makes a New York building Deco? Not all NYC buildings are Deco, but the Chrysler Building is! That's the shiny, jazzy building in the middle of this picture. It's in Manhattan's Midtown East area. So you notice how it stands out from all the other buildings? Let's look at what makes the Chrysler Building and other buildings Art Deco!

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In this lesson, we will focus on two things: structure and design. The structure of buildings includes their shape, their size, and how they are built. The design of buildings refers to how lines and shapes are utilized to create patterns, forms, and decorations. In this illustration, by the artist and architect Hugh Ferris, we see the structure, or shape, of an imaginary building. The drawing was created in 1916, which was before the city had many skyscrapers. This was also a little before Deco became popular, but the building has the shapes, lines, and drama of the Art Deco style.

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All buildings have structure and design. Here we have two pictures of the Empire State Building. The Empire State Building is the world's most famous Art Deco building. Have you been to the Empire State Building before? In the photo on the left, we see the Empire State Building from father away, with almost the whole building in view. In the photo on the right, we see the top of the building. How would you describe the Empire State Building to a younger student or a friend who might not have seen it before?

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Internal structure includes the parts of a building that give it support, keep it standing, and make it function. Here we have two drawings of the Chrysler Building, the jazzy building we saw before. (Click to make outlines appear) The red rectangle outlines its internal structure. Doesn't the internal structure remind you of a skeleton, especially a backbone? Buildings have their own skeletons, just like humans do.

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Structure can also be the silhouette or outline of a building. In this picture, we see the outlines of several buildings. (Click to make outlines appear) The red lines you see here outline the silhouette of the Empire State Building. You've probably seen silhouettes of people represented in art, books, cartoons, and video games before. (Click to make silhouettes appear) Silhouettes give the viewer a sense of a figure's size and shape.

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The structure of buildings includes all of the things you recognize but might not stop and consider: walls, windows, roofs, and entrances like gates and doors. Here we see Noonan Plaza in the Bronx.

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The professional who designs a building is called an architect, and there are many related professionals who assist or work with architects. How the architect puts structural parts together determines the style of a building. This also includes the outdoor spaces around the building, which might be further realized by a professional called a landscape architect. Here is a picture of 30 Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. You

might recognize this as the area where they light up a huge Christmas tree and put out an ice-skating rink around the holidays. Have you visited Rockefeller Center or seen it in movies?

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Here we have a picture of famous architects dressed like the NYC buildings they designed. These men dressed up for the 1931 Beaux Arts Ball, a festive event. Look at the architect in the middle with the tall hat. That's William Van Alen, the architect of the Chrysler Building. (Click to make picture appear) Can you see how his costume looks like the Chrysler Building? Especially his hat? All the men in this picture are white men because of social restrictions during the era. But, today people of all races, ethnicities, and genders can become architects as long as they meet the educational and licensing requirements.

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So, when was Art Deco popular? The Art Deco style of architecture became popular in the 1920s and 1930s, about 100 years ago. Terms associated with this era include the Jazz Age and the Interwar Period. Here we have two pictures of another Art Deco building, 70 Pine Street in Manhattan. Can you imagine what times were like in the United States when 70 Pine Street and other Art Deco buildings were built?

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The Art Deco style was popular in the Roaring Twenties and during the Great Depression, which were two very periods. Many classic books and films that you may have studied in school or read or seen for fun were released during this time. Think of The Great Gatsby, The Grapes of Wrath, The wizard of Oz, and King Kong, as just a few examples. Can you think of other books and movies from the 1920s and 1930s?

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Deco buildings were designed during changing times in America, after World War I, which ended in 1918, and before Word War II, which ended in 1945. In this picture, we see construction workers eating lunch while they were building Rockefeller Center. Do you see how they're sitting on a beam high up in the sky? Look at the buildings behind them. Do you also notice that the men are not wearing any of the safety clothes or gear construction workers wear today? Many things were changing in our country at this time and many things have changed since then. Can you think of some other things that have changed in the U.S. in the past 100 years?

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As more people moved to Manhattan, New York City grew outward toward what are now the other boroughs, as well as upwards. As you know, there are five boroughs that make up the City of New York: the Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, and Staten Island, and all of them have unique Art Deco buildings.

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During this time, buildings were built taller and taller, creating the modern skyscraper. The Empire State Building was built from March 1930 to April 1931. The pictures here show a chunk of that time, going from June 1930 to November 1930. Can you see how quickly construction progressed from month to month?

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During this time, there were many new materials being created, like plastic and special metals, called alloys. Many of these materials came about because of military innovations that developed during the first World War. The Chrysler Building, which we see here, has a lot of metal right on its surface, which was a new thing for buildings at that time. This metal is an alloy, which is a material made by combining two or more metallic elements to give greater strength and make it resistance to corrosion, like rust. Do you know of other things the military invented throughout history that we use outside of wartime today?

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Even though buildings have the same structural parts, each building is unique. Most Art Deco buildings share features that are similar but not exactly the same, like people in a family! Here we have three Art Deco buildings in Manhattan: 120 Wall Street, The Century, and the Squibb Building. Do you see how they all belong to the same family? What's similar from building to building?

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Look at these buildings: 1001 Jerome Avenue in the Bronx and the Sears, Roebuck & Company Building in Brooklyn. Do you notice any similar features? (Click to make buildings shake)

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Now let's talk about shape and size. Buildings are 3-D, or three-dimensional, not 2-D, or two-dimensional. Every building has a general shape and size that takes up space. The overall impression of its size and shape is called massing. Here we have two photos of the Daily News Building in Manhattan.

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Art Deco skyscrapers normally have different stepped levels, or setbacks. These setbacks are similar to the steps in Mayan and Aztecan pyramids. These pyramids, or ziggurats, are in Mexico and Central America. In the first picture, we have a ziggurat in the country of Guatemala. (Click to make outlines appear) Do you see how it has steps? In the second photo, we have the Paramount Building, an Art Deco building in Manhattan. It also has steps, or setbacks. (Click to make outlines appear) Can you think of more examples of architects or other artists and designers taking influences? from other cultures?

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Vertical lines make your eye move all the way from the bottom of a building to the top. (Click to make arrow appear) In Art Deco buildings, windows are often "stacked" in vertical lines. Can you see the vertical lines formed by the windows in the Bronx County Building?

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Wrap around windows are windows whose name describes exactly what they do: they wrap around the corner of a building. (Click to make arrows appear) This type of window is very common in Art Deco apartment buildings, like 265 Cabrini Boulevard in Manhattan.

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Flat roofs are roofs that have no angle or slant. (Click to make outline appear, click again to make it go away) Some Art Deco buildings have flat roofs, or many layers of flat roofs, (Click to make arrows appear) that make the top of the building narrower than the base of the building, like the New Yorker in Manhattan.

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Pitched roofs are the opposite of flat roofs because they have slants. (Click to make arrows appear) Pitched roofs were popular before the Art Deco style, but they are not common in Art Deco buildings. This private house in Brooklyn is not an Art Deco building and has pitched roofs.

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One nice thing about flat roofs, is that Art Deco architects often used these spaces as outdoor communal space that had seating and gardens. Here you can see the rooftop gardens on some of the flat roofs of Rockefeller Center in Manhattan. Have you noticed other rooftop gardens?

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Now let's look at the design of Art Deco architecture. Design is about the look of a building—its interior and exterior. Here we have a photo of Radio City Music Hall in Manhattan. The auditorium and stage were designed to look like a rising sun. Do you think it looks like a sunrise?

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Every building is made of the same structural parts, but every building looks different because of its design and decoration. Architects are the professionals who design, or make artistic choices, about the look of a building. They come up with ideas for buildings, draw them, and build models. All of these artistic choices are known as "design." In this photo, we have the Waldorf Astoria, a famous Art Deco building in Manhattan.

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The design of all buildings includes colors! Sometimes architects use color to make their buildings stand out and other times they use certain colors for a particular reason. What colors do you see in the American Radiator Building? That's the building you see in the front of the first photo. Behind it is, of course, the Empire State Building. The architect of the American Radiator Building chose black and gold for a particular reason. The company that this building was built for made radiators and the function of a radiator is to put off heat and warm a room. Well, to illustrate that idea, the architect used black to represent coal and gold to represent the warm flame you get when you burn coal. The design of all buildings also includes materials on the outside of the building. We will look at materials later in this lesson.

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In addition to the color of a building, design includes the objects *on* buildings. These decorations make buildings look prettier or more interesting. Why do you think the architect chose to put this dragon decoration on the American Radiator Building? It has to do with the same reason the architect chose black and gold.

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Design also includes what the entrance of the building looks like. This could be the door, the area around the door, gates, or walls. What design do you see in the entrance of the Graybar Building?

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Design also includes how the windows of a building look. How are they shaped? Are they framed or accented? In this first photo, we have the Daily News Building in Manhattan. In the second photo, we have a close-up photo of that building's windows. What do you notice about them?

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Design also includes the patterns on the walls. These can be the interior or exterior walls of the building. Design could include the patterns around the building's doors, too. Can you describe the pattern on the McGraw Hill Building in Manhattan?

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Now let's look at surface materials, which are part of a building's design. The exterior, or outside, of a building can have all kinds of materials on its surface. Now let's look at some materials you might find on the surface of an Art Deco building, like stone in 29 Broadway, the Manhattan building in the photo here.

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Bricks can be a surface material. Usually they are red-brown or red-orange like the bricks you see in the second photo. But did you know bricks can be other colors? Just look at The Ardsley, the Manhattan building in the first photo. What color bricks do you see in this building?

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In the top photos, you can see the array of colors that bricks can be. There are yellow bricks and even blue bricks, too. Did you know that bricks can be rotated in different directions? They can be used to form all kinds of patterns. Next time you walk around your neighborhood, you'll be surprised at the different patterns you notice in the brickwork of buildings you pass.

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Metal can be a surface material, too. It can come in a range of colors, like gold, silver, bronze, and copper. What effect does the metal on the Brill Building give?

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Another surface material is stone. As you've probably know from science class, there's a huge variety of rocks and sediments, and they vary in color, texture, and other qualities. Look at the Eldorado, an Art Deco building in Manhattan. What color stone do you see?

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Sometimes we make other materials look like stone, so it's not real stone, just something that resembles it. This is called cast stone and it's made from concrete. Concrete can have rocks, like gravel, in it, but it has other materials, too—including a lot of sand. Do you see how part of the entrance of the 181st St. Subway Station is made from concrete, or cast stone? (Click to make outline appear)

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Another surface material is glass. Glass can be put on the surface of buildings, not just used as windows. Did you know that glass comes in a whole rainbow of colors? Look at the glass in One Wall Street. What colors do you see? Look closely because there's more than one. This whole room is actually decorated with small pieces of red and gold glass! What effect does this glass have on the viewer? How do you think it would feel to enter this room?

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Sometimes glass is used to make lots of windows that look like walls of glass. Look at the windows in this photo of Steiner Studios in Brooklyn. Do you notice how the windows curve around the corner of the building? Can you imagine looking out from there? What a view!

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Glass can be made into big, thick blocks called glass bricks and then stacked upon one another to make these walls. As you might suspect, glass brick walls let in more light than other walls because it's translucent—close to transparent but not quite as see-through. There's a lot of glass brick on the front of the William Lescaze House in Manhattan.

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Here we have a photo and a watercolor illustration of Stella Tower in Manhattan. Can you guess any of the materials in Stella Tower?

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Now that you know some of the basic surface materials that can be used in designing a building, let's look at some of the wonderful surface materials we often find in Art Deco buildings. The surface material you see here is limestone, a smooth stone often made into large blocks. You can see limestone on the surface of the Brooklyn Public Library. Have you been there?

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Another Deco surface material is granite. This is a stone that can be smoothed and polished. When you look at 275 Madison Avenue you can see that the black portions of the building are granite. You have probably seen granite rocks outside. They often have a natural glitter, or mineral, in them called mica. Mica makes granite sparkle. So, if you look closely at the granite in Deco buildings, you can usually see what looks like glitter.

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Surface materials like limestone and granite are often used for a large part of a building's exterior. You can see a lot of limestone at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan!

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Smaller parts of a building may have special sections of decoration made from other surface materials. Look at the sculpture of Wisdom above the doorway at 30 Rockefeller Plaza. What colors do you see in this figure and the sky that surrounds him? Do you think Wisdom is made of just one material or more than one material?

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Decorative surface materials are often used to add decoration to the outside of a building. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were many new materials added to Art Deco buildings to make them look different and more modern. Here, we have a picture of the Chrysler Building. We're looking at its entrance, up close. What materials do you see in the Chrysler Building's doorway?

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Mosaics are popular on the exterior and interior of Art Deco buildings. A mosaic is a picture or design made from small pieces of colored glass or ceramic tiles. Ceramic is a special kind of clay that you may have used in art class; it's the kind that goes in a kiln, or special oven, not the kind you leave out to air-dry. Tiles are little squares, rectangles, circles, or sometimes other shapes of glass or ceramic that fit together like a puzzle. There's a lovely and unique mosaic on The Fish Building in the Bronx. Look at all the colors!

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(Click for detail pictures to appear) There's even a sea anemone. In these pictures that show the mosaic up close, you can see the individual tiles that are put together like a puzzle to make the underwater scene. What else do you see?

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Another Deco surface material is terracotta. Terracotta is a special kind of red clay that gets fired in a kiln, or special oven. You may have seen it used in bowls, vases, or planters. It can also be put on buildings, like the Gramercy House in Manhattan. Terracotta can bring bright colors to a building. What do you think of the colors used on the outside of Gramercy House? They really make the look of the building stand out and more exciting than other less colorful buildings.

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Sculptural relief is a kind of sculpture, or 3-D art. In a sculptural relief, the figure or design is slightly raised from the background, which is flat. It's similar to a coin: the President's head and the words stick out from the flatter part of the coin. Relief sculptures were often utilized to enhance entrances of Art Deco buildings. They were also used to make borders around windows and decorate roof edges. The second photo shows the Daily News Building, which has a huge relief sculpture above its doorway.

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Spandrel panels, or spandrels for short, are decorative pieces that fit between the stacked windows of different floors that are right above one another. You can see the spandrels very clearly in this photo of 1500 Grand Concourse in the Bronx. They are the orangish panels. In Art Deco buildings, spandrels often have a decorative pattern or sculptural reliefs, made from bricks, metals, cast stone, or terracotta.

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In the 1920s and 1930s, many architects used geometric shapes and lines to make patterns like zigzags and chevrons. (Click to make arrow appear) See how the red arrow traces a zigzag in 265 Cabrini Boulevard, the Manhattan building in the second photo. You can see black and gold chevrons in the first photo. Chevrons look like little arrows that are often placed side-by-side to form zigzags. The chevron is a very popular geometric form in Art Deco architecture.

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Geometric shapes became so popular that architects and designers began to simplify natural shapes into a more geometric interpretation—like fountains and leaves. Here we have an Art Deco fountain decoration at 181 Madison in Manhattan. Do you see how this fountain does not look like a real fountain? It's been stylized, or made to look like the idea of a fountain. The architect has put a creative spin, or personal style, on it.

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Here we have more geometric patterns at the Chanin Building in Manhattan. Can you see the leaves, birds, fish, and other stylized figures? They're beautiful, but they do not look like real-life versions of these things. They are stylized.

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A parapet is a low wall along the edge of a roof, bridge, or balcony. (Click to make the outline appear) In Art Deco buildings, a parapet can sometimes go far above the roof to make it decorative. This is why many Art Deco buildings look like they are wearing a crown—like 55 Central Park West.

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Thank you for joining me for the *Documenting Deco* lesson on structure and design. To learn more about *Documenting Deco* and the Art Deco Society of New York, visit www.artdeco.org. See you next time!