Up Front

Art Deco buildings are easily identifiable by their rectilinear design, angular ornamentation, and often-glazed bricks and metallic trim. Historians point out that the name is taken from the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, but the style has European origins and the term “Art Deco” wasn’t even popularly used until the 1960s.¹ Until that time, the distinctive low relief, geometric ornament, and staggered profiles of these progressive buildings were simply referred to as “Art Moderne” or Modernistic style.

The exuberant yet simplified decoration and reinterpretation of classical forms stems from a group of talented Austrian architects led by Joseph Hoffman, who founded the Wiener Werkstatte in Vienna in 1903, a workshop showing the latest creations from his school of architecture and design. In 1919, the Wiener Werkstatte opened a showroom in lower Manhattan in a building designed by Austrian-born Joseph Urban (1872–1933). Pittsburgh has a direct connection to this group through Urban, who designed the Urban Room in the William Penn Hotel in the 1928–1929 addition by architects Janssen & Cocken. James D. Van Trump calls the Urban Room “a fabulous Deco cave in a Renaissance setting.”

Lined in black Carrara glass (a favorite of Art Deco designers), with golden curtains and a purple-and-gold-colored ceiling medallion with a stylized sunburst light fixture, the room is a great introduction to the versatility of the style, which was used for interiors, stage sets, storefronts, decorative objects, and furniture. Urban designed both sets and buildings for the Ziegfeld Follies and the Metropolitan Opera House while in New York, and his sense of the dramatic is on display in this room.

The Art Deco buildings in Pittsburgh reinforce the sense of the style’s versatility, being that it has been applied to an airport, several schools, storefronts, and skyscrapers. The symbolism shifts slightly with each incarnation to accommodate the building type, but it always indicates freshness and progress.

The Koppers Building, designed in 1927, was influenced by two others: Eliel Saarinen’s trend-setting but losing design submitted for the architectural competition for the Chicago Tribune Building in 1922 and the New York Telephone Building designed by Ralph Walker in 1923.² The latter created a sensation with its set-backs and simplified ornament. The Koppers Building, designed by the Chicago firm Graham, Anderson, Probst, and White,³ has all the elements of Art Deco skyscraper design, including the use of lush materials like marble and bronze to adorn the lobby, and the coordinated design of all the interior fixtures even to the mail box, which is a bronze copy of the building in miniature. Across Seventh Avenue, another Art Deco masterpiece, the Gulf Building of 1930–1932, is a stripped-down version of classical with hard edges and setbacks designed by the New York firm of Trowbridge and Livingston.
At the Allegheny County airport, stylized airplanes and propellers ornamenting the entrance planters and zigzag-patterned brickwork along the cornice establish that this was the jazz era’s newest transportation link known for speed and sophistication. Designed by Allegheny County’s in-house architect Stanley Roush, with additions by Henry Hornbostel, the building remains in remarkably original condition for one designed between 1930 and 1931.

Finally, the architectural management of Pittsburgh’s schools shifted from control by six subdistricts, corresponding roughly to the ward boundaries, to a centralized school board in 1911. The new board hired a superintendent of buildings and between 1912 and 1932 built 72 new buildings or substantial additions to the local schools. For many of these years, the superintendent was Marion Markle Steen, a gifted architect who led the program to design inspired and forward-thinking school buildings in Art Deco designs. Here the use of a modern architectural style symbolizes the progressiveness of the educational system and highlights the move away from local ward control of the schools.

Previously, while Henry Clay Frick’s children attended a school with marble hallways, stained glass windows, and an observatory, the children of the 31st ward had lessons in a log building. Pittsburgh’s schools after 1911 had auditoriums, gymnasiums, indoor plumbing, and were well lit and ventilated. Among the first to employ the Art Deco style was Lincoln School at Lincoln and Frankstown avenues. Designed by Pringle & Robling in 1931, it uses imaginative brickwork and vertical ribbon windows to make a progressive statement. Here, for the
first time, separate wings are dedicated to the auditorium and gymnasium. Later schools took the Art Deco style to its fullest evocation. The Lemington School, designed by Edward J. Weber under Steen’s supervision, uses colorful Mayan-inspired terracotta trim, and it employs the required three-part plan (auditorium, classrooms, gymnasium) and does so with whimsy and style. Weber brought forth another fascinating design, which harks back to what Al Tannler of Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation calls “a contemporaneous starkly fanciful German and Dutch style known as ‘Expressionism’” for the Schiller school on the North Side. Schiller, named for German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller,\(^5\) was an appropriate choice for a school in an intensely Germanic part of Pittsburgh.

While the Art Deco style lasted a relatively short time (1920–1940), its impact on Pittsburgh and the durability of the buildings in this style are remarkable.

Lu Donnelly is one of the authors of *Buildings of Pennsylvania: Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania*, a forthcoming book in the 60-volume series on American architecture sponsored by the Society of Architectural Historians titled Buildings of the United States. She has authored several books and National Register nominations on Allegheny County topics and organized an exhibition on the barns of Western Pennsylvania for the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art.
Some local Art Deco buildings:

- **Koppers** (1927–1929), Graham, Anderson, Probst and White (successor to Burnham’s firm)
- **Gulf** (1930–1932), Trowbridge and Livingston
- **Allegheny County Airport** (1930–1931), Stanley Roush; addition by Henry Hornbostel (1936)
- **Grant Building** (1927–1930), Henry Hornbostel with Eric Fisher Wood
- **Urban Room** (1928–1929), Joseph Urban; addition by Janssen & Cocken
- **New Granada Theater** (1928), Louis Bellinger; Alfred Marks (1936/37)
- **Lincoln School**, Lincoln and Frankstown avenues (1931), Pringle & Robling
- **Mifflin School**, Mifflin Road at Lincoln Place (1932), Edward J. Weber for Link, Weber & Bowers
- **Lemington School**, 7060 Lemington Avenue (1937), Edward J. Weber (Marion Markle Steen, Supervising Architect)
- **Schiller School**, 1018 Peralta Street (1939), Edward J. Weber (Marion Markle Steen, Supervising Architect)

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1. The name was popularized by Katharine Morrison McClinton (1899–1993), who was known as an Art Deco specialist and wrote dozens of books on collecting antiques.
2. Also called the Barclay-Vesey Building (1923–1926), it survived the World Trade Center attack of 2001 and is being restored in lower Manhattan. Walker was employed at the time by McKenzie, Voorhees & Gmelin.
3. Successors to Daniel Burnham’s firm.
4. Under the supervision of the Superintendent of Buildings from 1919–1934, Scottish-born James Bonar, a mechanical engineer and local artist.
5. Tannler’s remark: *PHLF News*, March 2001, p. 7. Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759–1805) was born in Württemberg, Germany, and is also known as a historian, philosopher, and friend of Goethe.