

A LOOK INSIDE...



New York Art Deco: A Guide to Gotham's Jazz Age Architecture

ANTHONY W. ROBINS
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Reviewed by
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ANYONE FORTUNATE enough to tour the Art Deco splendors of New York with architectural historian, lecturer, and well-known guide Anthony W. Robins is not likely to forget the experience. Having explored Art Deco in all of New York City's five boroughs with him, I can attest personally to Robins' vast wealth of knowledge and infectious enthusiasm for this exuberant movement of the interwar years and beyond. Robins now shares his insights in a compact, tourist-friendly paperback, *New York Art Deco: A Guide to Gotham's Jazz Age Architecture*.

A native New Yorker, Robins spent twenty years in the Research Department of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission documenting architecturally significant structures being considered for landmark status. He prepared the official reports accompanying the designation of many of the city's Art Deco icons, including the Empire State Building and lobby, the exterior of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel and McGraw-Hill Building, and the Daily News Building and lobby, and he organized the city's first regularly scheduled program of Art Deco tours for the Art Deco Society of New York of which he was a founding member and former vice-president.

As Robins explains in his introductory essay, Art Deco in New York is epitomized by the stepped-back skyscrapers that rose on the Manhattan skyline in the 1920s and early 1930s—the works of such luminaries as Raymond Hood, Ralph Walker, William Van Alen, and Ely Jacques Kahn. But this modernistic trend soon spread to department stores, movie palaces, banks, restaurants, schools, churches, and even parking garages and filling stations throughout the city. The guide's fifteen itineraries, eleven in Manhattan and one for each of the other four boroughs, illustrate the richness and diversity of Art Deco in New York.

The entries combine historical facts, architectural descriptions, and entertaining anecdotes from Robins' storehouse of knowledge. Small color photos illustrate each listing, supplemented by sixteen exquisite color plates by acclaimed Art Deco photographer Randy Juster, whose website, Decopix.com, features images of Art Deco around the world.

Maps by New York cartographer John Tauranac accompany the Manhattan itineraries, with sites and corresponding text clearly marked. Especially welcome are Robins' explicit instructions, e.g., "Walk east along the north side of East 38th Street halfway down the block, and look across the street."



(top left) The distinctive crown of the RCA Building (later GE Building), Cross & Cross, 1929–31.

(above) Building models on the Cities Service Building.



(left) Edgar Brandt's gilded bronze fountain over the entrance to the Madison-Belmont Building.

(right) Elie Nadelman's muscular figures above the entrance to the Fuller Building. Photo by Randy Juster.



The exploration of Manhattan begins on the pedestrian footbridge over the entrance to the Brooklyn-Battery Tunnel, an ideal vantage point for viewing the patterns and textures of the polychromatic brick cladding of 21 West Street, and ends in Washington Heights with the rows of modest "unadorned, clean, and soberly designed" Art Deco apartment buildings lining Washington Avenue. In between, readers will encounter such famed Manhattan skyscrapers as the Empire State Building, The Daily News Building, the Chrysler Building, the RCA (now GE) Building, and the towers of Rockefeller Center as well as the elegant twin-towered residences of Central Park West—the Majestic, Century, and Eldorado. But Robins points out many surprises too—the scale models of the Cities Service Building (former 60 Wall Tower) above the main entryways, Edgar Brandt's gilded bronze fountain over the East Thirty-Fourth Street entrance to the Madison-Belmont Building, and Elie Nadelman's muscular figures flanking the clock on the Fuller Building.



(left) *The Letter* by Henry Kreis, one of two sculptures flanking the entrance to the Bronx Post Office.

(above) *Patterned brickwork on 832 Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, Kavy & Kavovitt, 1931. A cast-stone skyscraper skyline silhouette tops the middle window.*

(top right) *Paramount Theater, Staten Island, Rapp & Rapp, 1930.*



(left) *The former La Casina nightclub, Brooklyn, c. 1933.*

(middle) *Ambassador Apartments, Staten Island, Lucian Pisciotta, 1931–32.*

(above) *Glazed terra-cotta band of flying fish on the Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia Airport.*

The Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island itineraries prove that some of the most interesting and unique examples of New York's Art Deco lie outside Manhattan in the city's other four boroughs. Because of the greater distances between sites, these itineraries are organized into geographic clusters rather than walking tours, but most areas are accessible by public transportation.

The striking decoration on the "Bronx Wonder Building," the County Building on the Grand Concourse, includes freestanding sculpture and reliefs on the outside and murals depicting scenes from Bronx history inside. The Bronx Post Office also contains an impressive collection of artwork with sculptures flanking the entrance and thirteen murals in the main hall painted by Ben Shahn and his wife Bernarda Bryson. Intricately patterned brickwork, every inch "alive and wiggling," and a cast-stone skyscraper silhouette distinguish the apartment complex at 832 Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, and gilded reliefs of characters from American litera-

ture, such as Tom Sawyer, Moby Dick, and Edgar Allen Poe's Raven, gaze down on visitors passing through the doors of the Brooklyn Public Library.

The terra-cotta band of flying fish on the Marine Air Terminal at LaGuardia Airport and the streamlined ziggurat-like roof of the former La Casina nightclub in downtown Jamaica are among the Queens highlights. Staten Island offers the Paramount Theater with its stepped façade faced with bricks set in geometric patterns and the Ambassador Apartments, the borough's only Art Deco apartment building, resplendently decorated in brilliant terra cotta.

Robins' engaging text and vivid descriptions are guaranteed to leave readers longing for a firsthand look at New York's Art Deco. Travelers from Chicago can fly the Delta shuttle to LaGuardia and begin their Art Deco tour as soon as they land—at the Marine Air Terminal.

For a schedule of public tours, see anthonywrobins.com