

Art Deco Architecture in Cairo

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This collection contains a sampling of Art Deco buildings in downtown Cairo, Garden City and Zamalek. The collection as a whole serves to illustrate various typological features, specificities and local expressions of Egyptian Art Deco architecture imported from Europe since 1924.

Between the 1920s and the 1930s, The Egyptian government was determined to modernise Cairo to rival European cities and keen to modify the urban landscape with a number of major construction projects following the European model. The process of Europeanization had already started during the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-1848) with a series of reforms called “Tanzîmât” to establish a powerful, European-style state. At the end of British protectorate with the proclamation of partial independence of the country in 1922, educational reforms appeared in the field of architecture and substantial numbers of architects were henceforth trained in Europe, above all in Paris, to meet needs of government. Simultaneously, a number of international design competitions were organized in Egypt in which European, mainly Italian, architects participated. Concerning private architecture, major clients and patrons of the 1930s came from different cultural backgrounds. This cosmopolitan elite – French, English, Syrian-Lebanese, Armenian, Copt, Muslim, Christian etc. – lived in new residential neighbourhoods such as Garden City and Zamalek. All those elements, creating continuing cultural exchanges, explain in part the presence and the typological diversity of Art Deco in Cairo and in Alexandria.

Ornamental opulence of Art Deco adornments such as figurative geometrized friezes cover the entire envelope of facades. Parisian stylised motifs inspired by nature, like the “compotier”, a symbol of Parisian Art Deco initiated by Andrea Vera at the “*Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*” held in Paris in 1925, mingle with Beaux-arts, Neoclassical and Neo-renaissance styles. In this extraordinary eclectic Deco repertory, Neo-Pharaonic and Arab repertories are also notable. While in Europe, Orientalism symbolises exotic expressions, in contemporary Cairene architecture the process of re-interpretation of Pharaonic elements appears as a local expression and a symbol of Egypt’s national identity. Streamline Moderne Style, an architectural trend of Art Deco, much present in Anglo-Saxon countries, was also imported into Egypt from Europe. This late expression of Deco arose as a result of technological advances of The Industrial

Revolution which created new architectural solutions and the ideological thinking of the Werkbund. Therefore, naval and industrial architecture influenced Art Deco with curved forms, vertical and horizontal line and portholes.

Local architects from various origins and background – Georges Parq, Antoine Selim Nahas, Giuseppe Mazza, Nello Sinigaglia, Riccardo Smith, Gaston Rossi, Paolo Caccia Dominioni, Victor Salama, Azéma, Edrei, Hardy etc. – offered various interpretations of Egyptian Art Deco design. Two major types of approaches are perceptible: on one hand, eclectic Art Deco with ornamental profusion, on the other, a typology of facades featuring design in Streamline with ornamental sobriety.

In Cairo, Deco was reinterpreted with the traditional building methods. The art of stucco to create relief adornments, typical of The Mediterranean, was used to build residential buildings and not for big programmes like cinemas or monumental constructions, for which high grade materials were employed. The local construction process consisted in enveloping facades with brick masonry and treating with plaster or reconstituted stones. Decorative elements were moulded in a moist plaster, probably natural cement, a skill frequently employed for brick-facade design, while European Art Deco architecture presented high-grade materials and decors directly executed in cut stone. This process of moulding facilitates the fabrication of relief adornments and therefore allows ornamental profusion and diffusion of certain motifs. Local enterprises practiced in the field of applied arts. The ironwork of entrance doors, balconies and decoration of interior present incredible richness of geometrised streamlined motifs, stylised elements inspired by nature and a repertoire of Arab influence.