1925a

While the Art Deco exhibition in Paris makes official the birth of modern kitsch, Le Corbusier's machine aesthetics becomes the bad dream of modernism and Aleksandr Rodchenko's Workers' Club advocates a new relationship between men and objects.

1920–1929

"As for this famous *Exposition*, it's probably not worth seeing it. They built such pavilions! Even from afar they are ugly and from close it's an horror." In the letters he wrote from Paris to his wife (the artist Varvara Stepanova), the Russian Con- ▲ structivist Aleksandr Rodchenko did not mince his words about the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs of 1925—from which the label Art Deco derives. Siding with French workers who commented that the glitzy display of luxury goods was nothing short of immoral in such times of financial duress, the major exception for his utter contempt was Konstantin Melnikhov's Soviet Pavilion to which he had contributed the white, black, gray, and red color scheme: "Our pavilion will be the most beautiful for its newness," he beamed. Even if padded with national pride, Rodchenko's assessment of the fair was not unique. Calling the Exposition a "total failure," from both the social and the aesthetic point of view, the French critic Waldemar George singled out only five buildings that could "be properly called modern" at the Exposition: besides Melnikhov's pavilion, he named Gustave Perret's Théâtre, Robert Mallet-Stevens's Hall d'Entrée pour une Ambassade and Pavillon du Tourisme, and Le Corbusier's landmark manifesto, the Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, named after the journal that the Swiss architect had been editing since 1920.

Department-store modernism

The project of the Exposition had been discussed since 1907 in French political circles—as the success of several international fairs, notably in Turin in 1902 and Milan in 1906, was quickly erasing the memory of the grand 1900 celebration in Paris. But it was the • formidable participation of the Deutscher Werkbund at the 1910 Salon d'Automne in Paris, highlighting the thriving collaboration between designers and industry in Germany, that provided the definitive sting. French decorative art was in decline, a 1911 official report of the Société des Artistes Décorateurs asserted, its downfall clearly due to lack of imagination and servile dependence upon a glorious past, and it was soon to be smothered by foreign competition. An international contest, the report went on to say, would provide an incentive for the much needed reform of production, and it would force designers and industrialists alike to think about, rather than deliberately dodge, the new conditions brought about by the fast-developing machine age; the traditional association between decorative arts and luxury would be dissipated; a veritable "democratization of art" would follow, and art would at last regain its "true social function," which it had lost since the Middle Ages. Planned for 1915, the fair was postponed several times (first because of the war, then because of the financial and political crises that resulted from it), and ended up opening a decade later. In the meantime, the control of the enterprise had passed from the professional designers' organizations to leaders of commerce, with the four major Parisian department stores at the helm. Each had their own lavish pavilion, all built on the same model—a symmetrical temple one entered through a monumental door to discover an interior space divided into overstuffed living rooms around a central hall.

Designers were not the only constituents to be defeated by the massive onslaught of commercial interests. The choice of the fair's site—in the same area as its 1900 predecessor at the center of Paris—signaled the failure of social reformers (among them several architects such as Le Corbusier) to persuade the French government that the fair should be conceived as a testing ground for the burning issue of mass housing in postwar France. Rather than staging an architectural competition for a model housing complex in a vacant area, something that could be inhabited after the close of the exhibition—a strategy favored by the Deutscher Werkbund in the twenties—the exhibition's committee decided to allow the construction of temporary pavilions as showcases for foreign products or those of French provinces and national guilds, and also of any private company able to afford the considerable rent.

The immense touristic success of the fair was in direct proportion to its artistic mediocrity. For the most part, its architecture consisted of streamlined or slightly geometrized versions of past styles, and nearly all the luxury objects it contained could have been designed a quarter of a century earlier. Indeed, while the innovative furniture ▲ proposed by De Stijl or the Bauhaus had been utterly banned, the only foreign products to be welcome (and widely imitated) were those issued by the Wiener Werkstätte, founded in 1903. Amazingly, many of the best designers we now associate with Art Deco (such as Eileen Gray or Pierre Chareau) either did not participate or contributed very traditional interiors. "In fact," as Nancy Troy suggests, "the exposi-

▲ 1921 • 1929 ▲ 1917, 1923

tion as a whole might well be described as an attempt to link contemporary life in France with a lost or rapidly vanishing past. The long vistas bordered by manicured lawns separating symmetrically positioned buildings created a sense of stability and order that France had not yet recovered almost seven years after the end of World War I, and the unabashed opulence of the majority of pavilions was in manifest contrast to the financial situation in which the exposition had been planned." One should add that even though the majority of visitors were from the middle class, which accounted for only a little less than a third of the French population at the time, few would have been able to afford much of its content. The fair was a fantasy land, where one dreamed about the way the affluent live before rushing to the department stores nearby in search of cheaper imitations of the saucer, teapot, or side table one had fancied. The commercial strategy was that of *haute couture*, not surprisingly given the spectacular participation of major couturiers such as Paul Poiret, whose three pavilions were floating extravaganzas on the Seine.

Le Corbusier's machine age

The most vociferous critic of the Exposition was Le Corbusier. After a long bureaucratic struggle he had been allowed to build his Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau, at the periphery of the fair [**1**]. It consisted of two parts. The first, airy and drenched in light, was presented as a two-storey unit excerpted from the (nonbuilt) Immeubles-Villas, an apartment-cum-garden complex which he had conceived in 1922 and whose design he had been refining ever since; the second part was a windowless rotunda off the patio, devoted to the Swiss architect's ideas on urbanism, notably his scandalous plan for Paris, the Plan Voisin (named after the pavilion's main sponsor, the Voisin aeroplane and car manufacturer) in which he was proposing to raze the center of Paris, save a few important historical monuments, and replace its chaotic urban palimpsest with a vast green area interrupted by high-rise towers placed at regular intervals. The Plan Voisin was pure provocation, and it produced the expected reaction in the press, but while the dwelling section of the pavilion was less harshly criticized, it also had a very conspicuous polemical intent.

Since the beginning of World War I, Le Corbusier had lambasted architects and designers for their refusal to take into consideration the new conditions of production created by the machine, a denial made particularly conspicuous by the rapid evolution of mechanical processes in all industrialized nations as a result of the war effort. Even when new modes of construction were involved and new materials used, this had no bearing on the design's formal aspect, almost invariably conceived as a superficial mask hiding the architectonic structure, in whatever historical style was favored by the client. For Le Corbusier, Art Deco represented the triumph of such fraudulence. Not only was the claim of its designers (that their goal was an aestheticization of mass products) a lie, but even had it been true, its premises would still have been wrong. His Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau was intended above all to demonstrate that by the sheer action of what he called "mechanical evolution" (a concept modeled after Darwin), industry was, by itself, able to engender a new kind of beauty: to tamper with it was a sure way to destroy it.

The pavilion was thus built using standard elements of the newest materials available, including the experimental wall paneling made of straw onto which concrete was projected. In the absence of any ornament, the modular regularity of the distribution of the vertical posts underscored the variations allowed by the structure (here a wall, there an opening) while, according to Le Corbusier, subliminally satisfying the visitor's "natural longing for order." But the most telling paean to industry was in the choice of furnishings that somewhat sparsely populated the pavilion: from the shelves and cabinets (industrial storage units labeled "*casiers standards*") to the chairs (notably, the famous Thonet bentwood café chairs, whose design dates from the nineteenth century) to the glass vases (laboratory glass vessels), most were objects already available in the marketplace and directly referring to public spheres of daily life, either work (office, laboratory), or leisure (cafés). In truth, some of these objects were slightly modified for the occasion—the Thonet chairs among them—but not in any way that would soften Le Corbusier's fundamental attack against his Art Deco colleagues reigning at the fair and their ideal of the bourgeois private home as an overall ensemble for which everything had to be custom made.

Le Corbusier's fascination with industrial standardization dates back to 1917, when he read Frederick W. Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*. In this book, published in 1911 and translated into French a year later, Taylor singles out efficiency in labor organization as the best way of maximizing profits and generating growth, even if it meant treating workers like machines. Henry Ford would soon follow suit (in 1913) with his invention of the assembly line, masterfully presenting this new form of slavery as a promise of more leisure time for the masses. Until the late twenties, with an amazing political naivety, Le Corbusier firmly believed that if industrial

1 • Le Corbusier, interior of the Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau, 1925
In the background is Fernand Léger's *The Baluster* next to a still life by Le Corbusier.

production were to be reformed according to Taylor's and Ford's principles, all the ills of postwar Europe would vanish by themselves. He saw modern architecture, situated at a midpoint between art (functionless) and industry, as an essential component of such a reform. And even though in his diatribes against decorative arts he had always insisted on the necessity to safeguard the autonomy of art—an autonomy consciously staged in his pavilion by the juxtaposition of a few modern paintings and sculptures and of an eclectic variety of objects whose use-value was highlighted—his theory and practice of painting rested for a good part on a fetishized notion of standardization. Indeed, his first homage to Taylorism appeared in *Après le cubisme* (1918) the book he wrote with Amédée Ozenfant to launch their pictorial movement, which they called Purism.

The taming of Cubism

Contrary to the claims made by Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (that is, Le Corbusier, who had not yet adopted his pseudonym) and Ozenfant in their tract, Purism is by no means a "post-Cubism." Rather, it consists of a mere academicization of Cubism which, paradoxically, ▲ was based on a complete misunderstanding of Braque and Picasso's enterprise. For the two Purist painters, Cubism was pure decoration— "if a cubist painting is beautiful," they write, "it is in the same way a carpet is beautiful." Although Cubism made ample use of geometrical forms, Ozenfant and Jeanneret claimed, it did so without recourse to any laws—its compositions were arbitrary, they were not controlled by any "standard." Braque and Picasso's extraordinary investigation of pictorial representation as indeed an arbitrary system of signs completely escaped the Purists, who saw in Cubism only an incompetent geometrization of reality that needed to be "corrected," just as the strictures of the assembly line prevented any erratic behavior on the part of workers.

This was not new by any means. As early as October 1912 a group of artists had organized the Salon de la Section d'Or (Golden Section) with the explicit program of presenting to the public a version of Cubism that would be tamed by "universal" principles of "geometric harmony" going back to classical Greece and well established in the tradition of French painting, from Poussin to Ingres to Cézanne and Seurat. Simultaneously, one of the participants—Raymond Duchamp-Villon—was presenting at the Salon d'Automne his facade of the Maison Cubiste, a project which is perhaps the seed of the Art Deco phenomenon. Conceived by André Mare, one of the most established designers in the future 1925 fair, and replete with works of Duchamp-Villon's co-exhibitors at the Section d'Or, such as his brothers Marcel Duchamp and Jacques Villon, but also Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, the authors of *Du Cubisme* (1912) (a book long held as the theoretical basis of Cubism despite Picasso's and Braque's scorn), the decoration of the Maison Cubiste's three interior rooms is not particularly memorable. Its patent eclecticism was intended as the definitive blow against Art Nouveau design (deemed "international," which meant "German" at the time), and it was successful at that, but only by espousing the nationalist cover of a Louis-Philippe revival (not quite a return to the ancien régime, since it had developed under a bourgeois monarchy, this style was heralded as the last true French style). Duchamp-Villon's facade partook of this revivalist mode, and it revealed even more clearly that the modernism of the Maison Cubiste was only cosmetic: this decor was not much more of a pastiche of a nineteenth-century version of a seventeenth-century *hôtel particulier's* facade, powdered with specks of angular faceting.

In the postwar context, the nationalistic current of this academic Cubism flourished under the aegis of what has been called the ▲ "return to order": the "righting" of Cubism was part of the reconstruction ideology, together with a renewed interest in French *latinità* or a public policy favoring a surge in birthrate. Given his horrified response when discovering Picasso's first Ingres pastiches in 1915, which arguably mark the beginning of the "return to order," it might come as a surprise that Juan Gris would have so definitively • joined its ranks. Yet even though Gris's prewar collages are no less feats of spatial ambiguity and plastic wit than those of his Spanish friend and mentor, his artistic creed reveals a latent rationalism that could not have been further from Picasso's attack against the tradition of mimetic representation: "Cézanne transforms a bottle into a cylinder," he wrote, and "I begin with a cylinder in order to create a bottle." In other words, geometry comes first: objects, to be included at all in the composition, have to fit an a priori grid.

Ozenfant's and Jeanneret's paintings follow the same logic (though their justification, unlike Gris's, was an appeal to Taylorist organization)—and it is not by chance that Le Corbusier included one of Gris's canvases in his Pavillon. Indeed, for all their paintings—inevitably still lifes **[2]**, and most of them in a format determined by the golden section—Ozenfant and Jeanneret first established a grid of regulating lines ("*tracés régulateurs*") establishing the placement of "object-types" (supposedly the lucky survivors of "mechanical evolution"), often depicted both in plan

2 • Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier), ***Purist Still Life*, 1922**
Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 (25⅝ x 31⅞)

▲ 1911, 1912   ▲ 1919   • 1919

1920–1929

3 • Fernand Léger, *Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner)*, 1921
Oil on canvas, 183.5 x 251.5 (72¼ x 99)

1920–1929

and elevation and alluding directly to architectural forms (a carafe becoming a doric column, the neck of a bottle, a chimney). Volumes are reduced to simple prisms, with an occasional accentuation of the modeling all the more perceptible now that most objects are rendered by planes of color as flat as the background; orthogonals dominate; colors are never strident: the overall tone is one of tasteful, but somewhat vapid, restraint.

Another painter whose work was included in Le Corbusier's 1925 pavilion needs to be mentioned here, namely Fernand Léger—for although his work too was inflected by the "return to order" ideology, he was the only French artist who shared, and even exceeded, the architect's adulation for the machine. Although Léger had never emulated Picasso's art, he borrowed from Analytical Cubism one of its main strategies (using a single notational element for every object represented in a painting) in order to realize in 1913 his first ▲ mature works, a series of canvases entitled *Contrasts of Forms*. On the verge of abstraction, these paintings were conceived as accretions of tubular volumes of bright color whose metallic rotundity is signified by white highlights. When he was drafted to World War I's battlefield, Léger's mechanistic enthusiasm did not abate, almost inexplicably, given the horrors he witnessed and profusely sketched, all due to the sheer force of modern armament. But he came back from the war with a blind desire to divest the machine of the destructive image it had in the eyes of his contemporaries. The tubular elements were gradually replaced by more recognizable segments of human anatomy [**3**]; the figures, almost all monochrome, schematically modeled, and striking poses that signify leisure, stood in more dramatic contrast to the colorful and dynamic background, most often cityscapes made of geometric shapes populated here and there by diagrammatic billboards.

▲ 1913

The Baluster [**4**] is perhaps one of Léger's most legible canvases of the period, and, save for the brash color, stylistically the closest to the Purist aesthetic, which is undoubtedly why Le Corbusier chose it for his pavilion. As Carol Eliel notes, the central element can be read both as a baluster and a bottle; the red form that echoes it on the left, with its upended white circular opening, resembles the vents of factories or ocean liners illustrated in *L'Esprit Nouveau* and common in Léger's cityscapes of the period; the vertical edge of the book suggests a classical column; the "four verticals in the top half of the baluster, highlighted on a light ground, can be read as four smokestacks or grain silos, while the dashed horizontal form at the left edge of the canvas suggests the motions and movement of an assembly line as

4 • Fernand Léger, *The Baluster*, 1925
Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 97.2 (51 x 38¼)

well as film sprockets." This last allusion is particularly significant, coming soon after Léger had finished his film *Ballet Mécanique* [5], which was, if not the very first, at least one of the most self-conscious attacks ever launched against narrative cinema. With its absurd repetition of found footage (a woman climbs a flight of steps twenty-three times), its kaleidoscopic multiplication of eyes, balls, hats, and other circular shapes within the same frame, its pulsatile celebration of linear motion, its decomposition and recomposition of bodies and faces, its dance of triangles, circles, and machine parts, *Ballet Mécanique* is Léger's most remarkable foray into abstraction. By contrast, and even though it was taken off the wall at the request of the government, the mural painting that he exhibited in Mallet-Stevens's Hall d'Entrée pour une Ambassade seems subdued. ▲Inspired by De Stijl (in particular by van Doesburg's *Rhythm of a Russian Dance* of 1918), it belongs to a handful of works, all dating from 1924 to 1925, that Léger conceived as mural decoration—for him the only possible venue of pictorial abstraction.

Architecture or revolution/architecture as revolution

Had he been as distant from bourgeois culture as he thought he was, Léger might have reflected upon the very different proposal made by the Soviet entry at the Exposition, conceived as propaganda for the Soviet regime (which had just finally been recognized by the French government) and destined to prove that the Revolution was better equipped than the capitalist West to respond to the demands of postwar reconstruction. This entry consisted of two parts: Konstantin Melnikhov's Soviet Pavilion [**6**], and Rodchenko's Workers' Club built within that monument of 1900 kitsch, the Grand Palais.

Melnikhov's pavilion was by far the most daring building of the fair—Rodchenko was right on this point. In plan, it consisted of an oblong rectangle diagonally bisected by an exterior double staircase that functioned like a street one had walk through before entering any of the two enclosed triangular volumes on each of its sides. Tri-angles and ascending oblique lines were omnipresent (even lending

5 • Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy, still from *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924

Black Deco

The association of negritude with abandon animated the artistic life of the Left Bank, particularly in the nightclub district, Montparnasse, where jazz filled the air with delicious dissonances, and frenzied music became the support for drunken dancing until late into the night. Floorshows such as those by Josephine Baker, who danced half-nude, underscored this relationship, which nonetheless soon gave way to a very different experience of black form. This could be called "Black Deco," or the aestheticized use of tribal shapes and motifs within the decorative arts. For the costumes and sets of the ballet *La Création du Monde* (1923), Fernand Léger exploited the strong silhouettes and repeated patterns of primitive sculpture. The entire panoply of Art Deco furniture and accessories followed this lead as silver patterns were combined with the sheen of ebony woods and leopard skins were juxtaposed with crocodile hides. Where this luxury trade led, artists soon followed and the influence of Black Deco on sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi and Jacques Lipchitz could be seen, as well as on designers like Le Corbusier and Jean Prouvé. For all these figures, Black Deco was a powerful cocktail mixing "primitive" Africa with machine-age America.

▲ 1917

a new meaning to a traditional feature such as the slant roof). Melnikhov had created in architectural forms a homage to the "red wedge" of the Revolution that was as dynamic as El Lissitzky's famous 1918 poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. The red, white, and gray colors of the exterior walls and interlocking (oblique) canopies above the staircase made a stark contrast with the transparency of the main glass facades; the deliberately unluxurious material (painted wood) and the elemental, almost ludic, mode of assembly, in record time, of all the parts, which were shipped from Moscow, was a clear jab at the massive pomp of most pavilions in the fair and their decorative skin of enameled tiles or marble.

Though less ebullient, Rodchenko's interior was no less a critique of capitalist luxury and, above all, of capitalism's veneration of the private sphere, for it was relentlessly marked as a collective space [**7**]. The workers' club was a recent invention of the nascent Soviet regime. In exporting this concept—and in making sure it would not escape notice by commissioning one of the most active Constructivist artists for its design—the new Socialist Republic wanted to demonstrate that the Soviet Revolution, far from being barbarian, had engendered a new culture, and that, in its care, the workers had access to leisure, unlike those in capitalist countries. Faithful to the principles of his 1921 abstract sculptures, Rodchenko emphasized two

6 • Konstantin Melnikhov's Soviet Pavilion at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, 1925

● 1921

7 • Interior of Aleksandr Rodchenko's Workers' Club, built for the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs and installed in the Grand Palais, Paris, 1925

aspects of his wood furniture (painted in the same colors as the Melnikhov building): the transparency of their mode of construction (without upholstery, all the joints were revealed) and their transformability. "Emphatically mobile," writes Leah Dickerman, "the Club's objects were to be adjustable by the user, both for convenience and for different functional requirements. The reading table had leaves that could be moved from an inclined position, for supporting reading matter, to a flat one, creating an expanded work surface; cylinders holding photographs allowed for a rotating display of many images in a small space; and the gaming surface of the chess table spun to the vertical to allow the players access to the built-in seats." The true star of this hymn to polyfunctionality was the collapsible orator rostrum/movie screen, with its lattice unfolding at will in all directions of space, and the care that Rodchenko devoted to its design reveals that he conceived of his club as a media space, in which workers would process information and act upon it.

The assembly-line disposition of the two rows of chairs around the Club's table was no less informed by Taylor's principles than was Le Corbusier's raiding of the marketplace for "standard objects" with which to furnish his pavilion, but Rodchenko did not share the architect's blind faith in the machine as a guarantee of mankind's future well-being. At the same time as his Club showed (*contra* Léger) that the future of abstraction was not necessarily in decoration, it proposed a new relationship between men and objects, in which we would no longer be consumers but coplayers in the chess game of life. While Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture* ended with this alternative: "architecture or revolution," Rodchenko, true to his Constructivist program, articulated the slogan "architecture *as* revolution" with every square inch of his Club. Both dreams, the subsequent history of the century tells us, ended up as nightmares.

FURTHER READING

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