FALL 2010

CADS

Chicago Art Deco Society

Magazine



In This Issue

A Preview of the 11th World Congress on Art Deco, Rio de Janeiro

Art Deco India • The Ballets Russes • World's Fairs of the 1930s

ART DECO INDIA: A PERSONAL VIEW

By Scott Timm

In an ongoing quest to prove that *"Art Deco is everywhere,"* eighteen decophiles from the United States, Canada, and Australia arrived in Mumbai, India in mid-March 2008 for a two-week sojourn, under the auspices of the Miami Design Preservation League. The chaotic traffic, muggy hot climate, and effects of a fifteen-hour flight from the east coast of the United States contributed to the general sense of being overwhelmed by India. This feeling would diminish somewhat over the two weeks, but the initial sensory overload would be replaced by a sense of wonder at the spectacular beauty of the country.

There is perhaps no better starting point than Mumbai for examining Art Deco in India. While the city is filled with graceful architecture recalling the years of British rule, Mumbai had embarked on several land reclamation projects in the 1930s, and Art Deco was the architectural style chosen to communicate the message that this was a modern cosmopolitan city. Entire neighborhoods were built in the Art Deco style, and the group would spend several days getting to know them by walking the streets with a very knowledgeable local guide.

The British rule, or *Raj*, began in India in 1858 when the interests of the British East India Company were transferred to the Crown, namely Queen Victoria, who was proclaimed Empress of India in 1876. The British domination ended in 1947 with the Partition that created the Union of India and the Dominion of Pakistan.

The many years of British influence are still felt in Mumbai (until 1995, better known as Bombay). Most representative of this Raj-style architecture is the work of George Wittet, a Scotsman who arrived in India in 1904 and eventually became the first president of the Indian Institute of Architects. His Prince of Wales Museum (1909) and Gateway of India (1911–24) did much to popularize the Indo-Saracenic style of architecture, which combined native Indian, Islamic, and Gothic revival styles.

Due to the demands of housing the growing middle class of the 1930s, a project called the Backbay Land Reclamation Scheme brought a new architectural style to the area just west of the Oval Maidan, a large recreational field primarily used for cricket matches. Fronting this urban green space are block after block of fashionable, four- to ten-story Streamlined Moderne apartment buildings constructed of reinforced concrete. Another reclamation project created Marine Drive with its apartment buildings overlooking the Back Bay, part of the Arabian Sea.



The Krishna Mahal, 1939, one of the Streamlined Moderne apartment buildings in Mumbai.

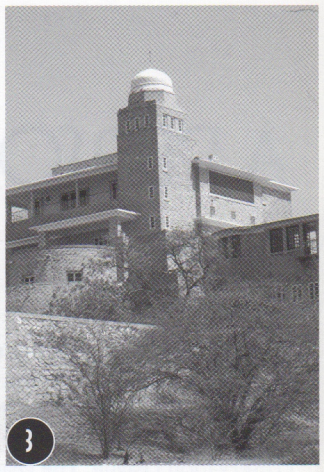
Architecturally, the buildings of Marine Drive draw upon a common vocabulary and offer a cohesive and attractive line of facades. A central tower, pierced by decorative windows, dominates the design and establishes the symmetrical form. Balconies on either side provide balance as well as shaded outdoor spaces for the residents, much like the traditional Indian bungalow. The entrance is usually marked with the building's name, spelled out in a modern typeface. Some particularly fine examples in this Churchgate area are the Palm Court, Court View, Sunshine, and Green Fields (all from 1939). Other splendid residential buildings in nearby neighborhoods include the Krishna Mahal (1936), Empress Court (1938), Rutton Manor (1939), and Reviera (1943).

Mumbai is the center of the Indian film industry (known informally as Bollywood), which was producing over 200 feature films a year in the 1930s. Several of the movie palaces built during that time are still in use today. Cinemas like the

ART DECO INDIA:











1–2. New India Assurance Building, Mumbai, 1935. Stylized frieze by sculptor N. G. Pansare, façade.

3. Sardar Samand Palace, Jodhpur, built in 1933 as a hunting lodge for Maharaja Umaid Singh.

4. Electric House, Mumbai, 1936.

5. Liberty Cinema, Mumbai, 1950.

6–10. Entrances to the Green Fields, Palm Court, Court View, Reviera, and Sunshine apartment buildings constructed as part of land reclamation projects in Mumbai.

11. Art Deco toilet building outside the Karni Mata Temple in Deshnok.

Regal (1933), Eros (1938), Metro (1938), New Empire (1948), and Liberty (1950) retain original decorative elements in their sumptuous lobbies and auditoriums, although other interiors have been altered to create multiplex facilities.

Just as in the United States, Art Deco became a style favored by corporations to project an image of modernity, efficiency, and sophistication. The New India Assurance Building (1935) combines a modified classicism with Art Deco, seen especially in its strong vertical ribs. Stylized friezes with industrial and agricultural themes by the sculptor N.G. Pansare ornament the façade. The Art Deco style of the Electric House (1936) makes a strong connection between modern architecture and modern electricity systems.

A quick flight took the group from Mumbai to Jodhpur, located in the Thar Desert in the state of Rajasthan. Founded in 1459 by Rao Jodha, Jodhpur contains many attractions for tourists, including the Mehrangahr Fort, Jaswant Thada, and the Osiyan temple. Decophiles, however, will want to journey out into the desert to visit the Sardar Samand Palace.

Built in 1933 as a hunting lodge for the Maharaja Umaid Singh, Sardar Samand sits above a large man-made lake, whose shores provided recreation—fishing, hunting, trapping—for the Maharaja and his guests. Still sporting original furniture and decorative elements, this heritage hotel offers a chance to step back in time and imagine the good life as only a Maharaja could. On the drive back to Jodhpur, we saw Indian gazelles in the fields, looking like Art Deco figurines come to life.

Back in Jodhpur, the main attraction is the Umaid Bhawan Palace, the principal residence of Umaid Singh, who, incidentally, served as president of the British Royal Society of Architects. While Sardar Samand was the Maharaja's hunting lodge, Bhawan was truly his palace, with a total of 347 rooms—called the largest private residence in the world. Designed by Henry Lancaster and constructed between 1928 and 1943, the Bhawan Palace originally began as a

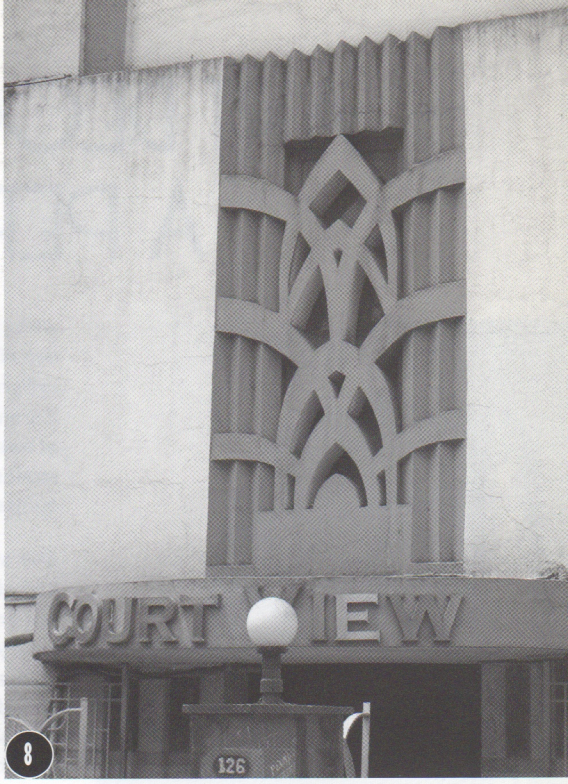
A PERSONAL VIEW



6



7



8

public relief and employment project for some 3,000 area artisans. Built of locally-sourced chittar sandstone, the palace is a mix of Art Deco and Indo-Saracenic influences and is currently divided into three functions: the royal residence, a museum, and a five-star heritage hotel.

The city of Bikaner, near the Pakistani border, was a delightful surprise, with numerous Art Deco residential and commerical buildings. The locals, however, neither recognized the term Art Deco nor understood why we only wanted to photograph early twentieth century buildings when Bikaner offers a number of fifteenth century examples.

One of those fifteenth century buildings is the Karni Mata Temple, located in the small village of Deshnok just outside Bikaner. Certainly not Art Deco, it is a Mughul-style temple with an open courtyard and is famous for its rats, which are considered sacred and protected within the temple. Visitors must remove their shoes (proper behavior at any Indian religious building) to enter the complex and carefully avoid stepping on one of the thousands of rats that scurry through the temple. Followers of Karni Mata provide large bowls of milk, water, and grain for the rats, and visitors who eat from these communal bowls are said to receive great good fortune. Also auspicious is the sighting of one of the temple's rare white rats.

In the plaza outside the Karni Mata temple sits what is perhaps the world's only Art Deco toilet building. The round, three-tiered concrete structure is painted pink and has the look of a recently landed flying saucer. Truly, Art Deco is *everywhere*!

No traveler to India can leave without experiencing the majesty of the Taj Mahal. Constructed by Shah Jahan from 1632 to 1653, the Taj is a memorial to his favorite wife, Mumtaz. Actually a complex of several structures, the formal garden is flanked by the central mausoleum, a mosque, the great entrance gate, a burial chamber for the Shah's other wives, and a tomb for Mumtaz' favorite servant. The glistening



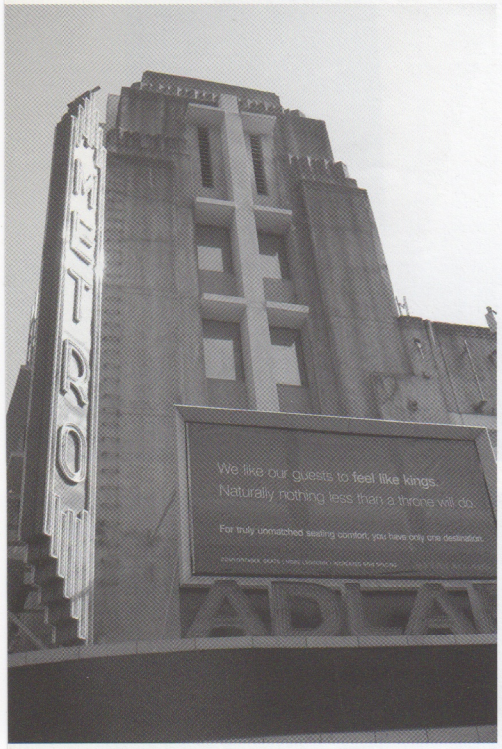
9


10

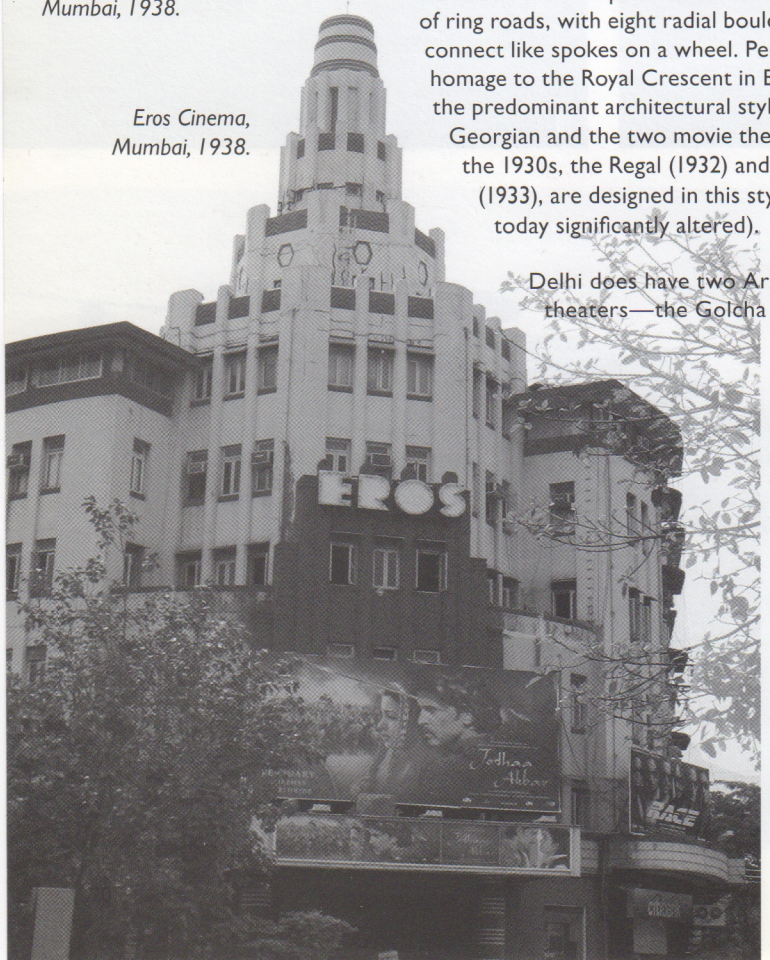


11

ART DECO INDIA: A PERSONAL VIEW



Metro Cinema, Mumbai, 1938.



Eros Cinema, Mumbai, 1938.

white marble façade features decorative elements in the form of Islamic calligraphy (quoting verses from the Koran). The inlaid designs are crafted of twenty-eight different precious stones, including jasper, jade, turquoise, lapis lazuli, and sapphire.

Our arrival in Delhi sadly marked the end of the trip. Most impressive was the Imperial Hotel (1931), Delhi's first luxury hotel, designed by D. J. Bromfield, an associate of Edward Lutyens, who designed much of the modern capital of New Delhi. Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and Lord Mountbatten discussed India's partition and the birth of Pakistan in the Imperial Hotel's Patiala Peg bar.

Like Mumbai, Delhi's central business district was redeveloped in the early 1930s with the creation of Connaught Place, named for Prince Arthur, the first Duke of Connaught. The centerpiece of Connaught Place is a circular central park surrounded by a series of ring roads, with eight radial boulevards that connect like spokes on a wheel. Perhaps an homage to the Royal Crescent in Bath, England, the predominant architectural style is neo-Georgian and the two movie theaters from the 1930s, the Regal (1932) and the Plaza (1933), are designed in this style (although today significantly altered).

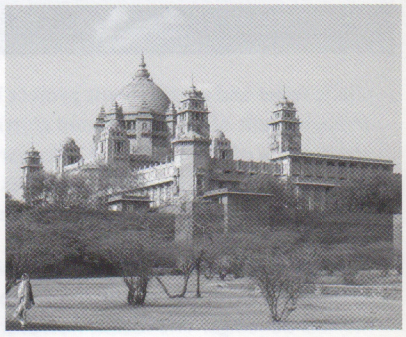
Delhi does have two Art Deco-style theaters—the Golcha (1954) and the Raj Mandir (1976)—but each is a more recent building designed in a retro-Deco/Streamline Moderne style. Clearly, the lure of Art Deco movie theaters continues today.

It's this lure of Art Deco that brought our group to India in the first place; an architectural style that spoke to the optimism and confidence in the future, a passion for new technology and advanced materials, and the promise of an elegant and graceful lifestyle. India's Art Deco architecture carries the same message as buildings in Chicago and Miami Beach, Sydney and Buenos Aires, Paris and Shanghai. Art Deco is everywhere!

Scott Timm leads walking tours of Miami Beach's Art Deco District and is the executive director of the MiMo Business Improvement Committee, a nonprofit organization devoted to historic preservation and economic development within the MiMo (Miami Modern) Historic District. ■



The Rutton Manor apartment building, Mumbai, 1939.



Umaid Bhawan Palace, Jodhpur (Henry Lancaster, 1928–43), the principal residence of Maharaja Umaid Singh.



The Prince of Wales Museum, Mumbai (George Wittet, 1909), illustrates the Raj-style architecture that combined native Indian, Islamic, and Gothic revival elements.