



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 7 EPISODE 7 (Late Oct 2025)

Claudia Chan Shaw

ART DECO 100 YEAR ANNIVERSARY

Tim Stackpool: [00:00:00] Claudia Chan Shaw, thanks so much for joining us on the podcast.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Oh, Tim, it's lovely for you to have me.

Tim Stackpool: It's great for us to have you as well, Claudia. Now, of course, this year, as I said in the introduction marks a hundred years since that first Paris exposition that really did give art deco its name. But from your perspective, what do you think made that exhibition such a defining moment in terms of design and in terms of art.

Claudia Chan Shaw: It was super, super important. So we're talking 1925, the exposition in Paris, and it went for six months. So it wasn't just a, uh, you know, here we go, let's have an exhibition for a month and then pack it up. So it went from April to October in 1925, and all of these ideas came to a head. So it's sort of weird, you think, oh, how can one exhibition. Suddenly give birth to art deco. But these ideas have been bubbling along for about 30 years, since about 1909, and came to a head in 1925 in Paris. And the wonderful thing about it was we, we came out of the austerity of World War I and, and France is sort of. Shaking and thinking, no, no, no, no, no. We need to reassert the French style. We need to show everybody that France is the leader in design and luxury. So they, they set a high benchmark and they, they had 15,000 exhibitors. 20 countries were invited to attend. Germany was not invited.

Australia was not invited, although a lot of Australians did attend. America was invited but did not attend. Because they thought, oh, well we really don't have anything new and artistic, so they didn't go.

But, 16 million people visited between April and October, 1925. So you've got everybody being exposed to these new ideas. So imagine you've got these all the world fairs. They, they put up these temporary structures and then knock them down. So we've got all these magnificent buildings springing up.

In all different pavilions from, from representing countries from around the world. So you've got fantastic architecture popping up. And then within those buildings, these pavilions that show the best design from each of these countries. So we've gone from coming off Art Nouveau, which is curvy and organic and highly decorative, and it's saying this is the future.

Everything is now simplified. We are getting rid of all that excess decoration, which, you know, they didn't really in in times, but, , generally getting rid of excess and making things sleek and modern and streamlined and beautiful. And they, they, the French were calling it the style moderne, the modern style.

So you've got so many countries. All getting together at the same time, showing the best that they, they've got with these ideas that have been emerging for over several years. And bingo. At the end of it, you've not only got architecture, but you have decorative arts and industrial design. And that covers a lot in the world of design, does it not?

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. And did we see a lot of what you might call art deco at that exposition, or did it grow out of what we saw there?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Both. There's a, a, a French architect called Mallet-Stevens, Robert Mallet-Stevens, and he did this most incredible tower as a temporary structure that was insanely art deco. A lot of the pavilions for the department stores had these great radiating sun ray decorating the front, and we could see that coming through so often in, in Art Deco further down the track, Le Corbusier is there and he wants to knock down part of Paris and turn it into this very, very modern housing estate. So the ideas are all there. So we're seeing a lot of buildings taking shape. One of the centerpieces as you came into the exposition was by Lalique, and it was a giant fountain, and the water sprayed out of it in beautiful arcs, which is one of the symbols of art deco. But it was this glowing geometric fountain that screams. Art Deco. So that, that there, there were a lot of pieces there that were, we look at now and go, Hmm, yep, that's it. That's the style.

Tim Stackpool: If I, you know, look at Wikipedia, it talks about how Art Deco was inspired by sources like from Egypt and Aztec culture and cubism and the machine age and on it goes. But which of those influences do you think had the most enduring impact on Art Deco?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Because they, they all had and more Russian constructivism, Italian futurism. They all had an impact on design at the time. And, and it was like they were, while they were looking to the future and not looking backwards, boy did they look backwards. Ancient Egypt, Aztec culture, ancient Mayan culture, Chinese, Japanese the most enduring impact. Cubism would have to be up there because out, out of cubism that simplification of shapes comes these wonderful geometric designs and, and motifs that we see in Art Deco. The machine age, most certainly, we are looking to the future. Now we are shaking off old fashioned ideas and moving forward and, and becoming the machine age progress. Ancient Egypt was all over cinema design at that time. So all of those. Influencers were very, very important. Ancient Egypt, also touching Cartier's jewellery and, and clock design. And those beautiful hard stones that you would find in a and in Egyptian tomb like lapis, and carnelian are coming through in the jewellery.

So it's, it all comes together and it's incredible that art deco didn't actually have a manifesto as such, decreed, it's gonna be X, Y, Z. Just all of these influencers are coming together at the same time, and it's almost like a, a chef going, yeah, I have a bit of that and I'll have a bit of this, and I like that, so let's work in those those ways.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. But it's, it's very distinctive and, and so easy to identify with modern eyes looking back at it, across the nations, you know, this did reach around the world. How does it differ in your opinion and from your experience of travelling so much? How was art deco received in Australia, or how did it modify throughout Europe? How did those different regions interpret and perhaps adapt the Art Deco style into their own cultures? Can you identify that?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yeah, it's interesting because as you travel around and, and there, there's this great line how, how do you, how do you define Art Deco? And, there's a guy called Alistair Duncan, who was an author and an expert on art deco from New York.

And he's always asked: How do you define art Deco? And he said perhaps he could compare it to when the late US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart was asked during a landmark case, what is the definition of pornography? And his response was, I know it when I see it.

Claudia Chan Shaw: So it, that's what art deco's like.

Yes, I know it when I see it. So for instance, in Asia, if we look at a bustling cosmopolitan city like Shanghai in the 1930s, and you've got buildings like the Peace Hotel springing up in 1929 that looks like a rocket ship on the edge of the Bund, on the water. You've got Chinese architects being influenced by Hungarian architects who were fleeing Nazism, in Germany.

So you've got this, this whole melting pot of all different nations coming together in Shanghai because you didn't need papers. So Chinese characters and imagery is being given a hard edge and incorporated into the architecture. So Chinese, definitely, particularly Shanghai 'cause it's so Western embraces Chinese elements into deco design.

You go to Singapore and, in the 1930s, in a place called Tiong Bahru, this whole suburb of streamlined modern low cost housing pops up. You'd swear you're in Miami. But it's got that Singapore tropical edge. It's got porthole windows following, you know, the, the, the, the idea of the, the cruise ship and the great Normandy that was the greatest cruise ship of all time that came out of France.

You've got this idea of palm tree motifs. So you've got this tropical feel in countries that have warmer climates. You go to Cuba and the greatest piece of art deco design in Havana is the Bacardi building also in 1929. And it's this technicolor beautiful stepped ziggurat with a bat on this, on the top that is the symbol of the Bacardi rum.

So each of these places does their own take on Art Deco, and of course New York, the granddaddy of them all. We want the tallest building in the world. We are the fastest. The biggest, the best, the richest, and you've got the most eclectic, outstanding, incredible architecture coming through, particularly with, probably the greatest art deco building of all, which is the Chrysler Building from 1930.

So all this is happening at the same time. Shanghai Peace Hotel 1929, Bacardi Building 1929, Chrysler Building 1930. And they're all, they're all doing it at the same time. It's quite incredible. And while we have 16 million people going to the exposition in 1925, how are these people getting around? Because you travel by Ocean Liner in those days, you're not Charles Lindbergh. So it takes a long time to get to these places. But journals are being published, people are getting around, and the ideas are spreading around the world.

Tim Stackpool: Do you think there's been a movement, and I know there may be some bias here in your response, that has actually had so much influence and reached as far as it has, has there been any, any other movement you think that can match Art Deco in that respect?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Art Nuoveau was pretty good at it.

Tim Stackpool: Mm.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Particularly all around Europe, the, the Americas and the UK. And, and teeny, we knew, teeny weeny a bit in, in Australia, but it didn't reach reach as far as Art Deco. Art Deco was, was

everywhere. Yeah, absolutely. Everywhere. It was, you know, down, down here, Australia, New Zealand, it was South Africa. It was UK, it was Morocco, it was in China, Japan it was in Brazil. It was absolutely everywhere. And, and I'm not sure of another movement that has been so far reaching.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. Yeah. Certainly very fashionable. You mentioned Australia just then. Is there a particular way in which Art Deco took shape in Australia throughout history? Is there a special interpretation, I guess, of the, of the style that's maybe distinct compared to the rest of the world?

Claudia Chan Shaw: We did our own versions, and I'm speaking, um, mainly about Sydney 'cause that's, that's my home. We did our little skyscrapers. If you look at the AWA tower in York Street with its little mini, mini Eiffel Tower on the top. That was based on a New York skyscraper. We had some funny interpretations. There's the BMA building in Macquarie Street. The British Medical Association building and it, it's opposite the Botanic Gardens and it's highly decorative on the outside, on the exterior. And it's got these, medieval knights protecting the building, but way, way up the top, which you can't see from the street are these koalas. That are clinging onto the exterior of the building. In Goulburn, there's a place called Elmley Chambers. That's the 1930s and it's covered in this polychromatic terracotta work on the front and it's got a Rams head as the centerpiece of the building because some local grazier commissioned the building.

Claudia Chan Shaw: We're having, adding our own touches. There's a building in downtown Melbourne that's also got koalas hanging off the building. So we looked to flora and fauna and sometimes I think had a little bit of a private joke too. And then certainly I, I think Australian pub architecture, which is streamlined moderne, so coming from the thirties and forties, has gotta be, you know, distinctly Australian because, at the time, tooth's and Tooheys, the major brewers were saying now we need to update we're going to redesign in the style of the day. And oh, that would be this streamline moderne Art Deco. So that's pretty, pretty distinctive, I think, our pub architecture.

And then if you look at a building like the Anzac Memorial in Sydney, which I, I think is one of the greats simple, quite austere ziggurat form by, Bruce Dellit. Yet it has this incredible sculptural work that seems to grow from the building, these figures from the a IF the nurse and the, the artillery man and the signal man, designed by a sculptor Rayner Hoff. The building and the sculpture seems to be become one. And that's unique. That really is very special.

Tim Stackpool: And Claudia, are you heartbroken at all at some of the loss of perhaps the Art Deco architecture in Australia that we've let go? Particularly maybe in Sydney,

Claudia Chan Shaw: don't start me honestly. The Ashfield King Cinema where I saw Herbie Rides Again. Oh, yeah. Gone. Oh, I think it's been knocked down twice. And then, everybody of a certain age when I go around, talking about Art Deco around the country and they, they say, you didn't mention the Hotel Australia. You didn't mention that. You know, they knocked down the Hotel Australia to build the MLC centre. So many beauties gone. It just. Really, really sad. It's, it's criminal, so, yeah. I, I cry under my pillow every night about that, Tim.

Tim Stackpool: Art deco, though, you know, is beyond architecture as well. It really pushed itself through interiors and even practical objects. And, and I, I do recall there] was a, an entry into the

Archibald Prize. By John Klein. And it was actually a picture of you. As a, as a lampstand. An Art Deco lampstand.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yes. Yes. It did touch everything I like to think of, if you imagine a beautiful, let's call her an Art Deco woman. And, from her head to her toe, she is art deco. So her, hat. Her shoes, her dress, her jewellery, her handbag, everything she wears, and then she sits on the chair in her modernist apartment and the furniture is all Art Deco. She pops into the kitchen and she takes a, a drink out of the, the Kelvinator and it's Art Deco.

Claudia Chan Shaw: She has a cup of tea or she has a drink from a decanter, and that's Art Deco. Then she jumps into the car and she goes to the cinema to watch a movie musical. She's in 1930s obviously, and she lives in Pots Point in the Macleay Regis or something like that. Every single thing in her apartment, in her daily life, in the magazine that she looks at in the, the windows of the department stores that she's looking through. It's all Art Deco. It touches absolutely everything. And if she wants to do the vacuuming, she could have the coolest looking vacuum cleaner that looks like a rocket or a bullet.

Claudia Chan Shaw: She can push the baby around in a baby carriage. That's all tubular chrome. It's everyday objects. Listen to the radio. Oh my God, Art Deco radio design. Incredible. And it also coincides with these new plastics coming through too. So while the 1925 Paris Expo is luxury, luxury, luxury, high-end, beautiful materials, then the second phase of Art Deco, the streamlined modern and the introduction of new plastics like Bakelite and things like that Catalin go into mass production. So they become, these designs become available to everybody and they can be mass produced and formed. And how easy geometric shapes put it together, put some decoration on and away you go.

Tim Stackpool: Speaking of that sort of personal connection that everyone in the era would've had with Art Deco, Yyour own home, I want to ask about, uh, in the inner west of Sydney, which is a great centre of the arts in that city, have you woven Deco, I fear asking this question, how much Art Deco is in your home?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Not a lot. Can't afford it. I have a very eclectic household. I'm a bit of a kook, so, if you come up the stairs on the front porch is a three metre high rabbit that I designed for the Chinese New Year Festival. And I snuffled one of them. It's illuminated., so when guests come, you know, I run outside, it's like Jacques Tati. turning on the fountain. You turn it on this giant rabbit doing Tai Chi glows. And then you come into the, the front room and there's a three metre high golden robot rat that I designed for the Sydney of Sydney Lunar New Year for the year of the rat.

And it's, got whiskers and it's got a big cog in its back and it's like a, a giant golden robot rat. And then you look at the display cabinets and they're full of tin toys and robots because I'm a collector and then I would love for the house to be full of beautiful art deco sculptures, but, um, they're a bit pricey.

But what I do have. Interestingly, I started to gather in, in the late 1980s because I've always been a bit obsessed with this Erté screen print, for instance, Erté, the, the Romain de Tiroff who was, who spent eight decades really designing the most incredible emblematic designs for Art Deco.

So there's an Erte screen print. There's also Erte lumiere, which is etched glass with a one of his beautiful ladies, and you, you turn the light on and, and she glows golden. A Man Ray print, there's an Olive Cotton photograph, her 'teacup ballet', which is from 1931, which is one of Australia's great modernist photos. So amongst all the crazy eclectic. Toys and frivolous nonsense, there are some key pieces that you know are, are of the time. And there's one piece which is an Art Deco kangaroo from 1927 designed by Wedgwood and, uh, the artist was John Skeaping and it's beautiful white, angular kangaroo. That is really, he's very elegant, but he's kind of butch too. He's, he's powerful. And that's probably the last piece I bought and probably, um, the last piece I will buy because it does get a bit pricey.

Tim Stackpool: Is there something you've been seeking that you've never been able to land?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yes. There is a very, well, he's obscure to most people. a Czech photographer, his name is František Drtikol, and he did the most. Incredible photographs during the 1930s. And he started off photographing real models with fantastic geometric backgrounds. And then he did this series of rather abstract photographs where he cut out this little dancing life figure, that looks like a really skinny person, but if you look really carefully, she's a cutout with this dramatic lighting that forms arcs and diamonds and fabulous shapes on the backdrop. I'm hanging for one of his pieces.

Claudia Chan Shaw: um, when I was in Shanghai leading an Art Deco tour, or was it Beijing? No. Beijing, , leading a tour for Renaissance Tours, we were doing Art Deco to Art Now. China and we did Shanghai and Beijing, and I saw one of his photographs there and it was the first time I'd seen them and I thought, wow, this is amazing. And then went away. Then started as I researched more about general Art Deco, I thought, hang on a sec. That's what I just saw. And I was, I would've entertained buying when I was there, but the person when I walked into the gallery was on lunch break and I'm running around this empty gallery going, geez, that's nice. So, and I've since looked online and gone, oh, can't afford that.

Tim Stackpool: Oh

Claudia Chan Shaw: no. But that's what I want. So, you know, if anybody's feeling generous, thanks.

Tim Stackpool: Send it along. I just want to kind of see if we can draw a parallel with today, because Art Deco, you talked about before, associated with glamour and, and cinema and optimism as well. Do you think people are looking to a similar sort of design today, looking for that escapism or that optimism?

Claudia Chan Shaw: There is a lot of anxiety in the world. And yes, in the, you know, during the depression, we'd go to a movie musical in the 1930s and it was all singing, all dancing, glamour, and you would escape. And we don't go to the cinema as much anymore because we have it all on our phones and all on our iPads and all on our streaming services, and I kind of lament this 'cause I'm, I'm pretty analogue and old fashioned, but escapism today is generally found through a screen. You binge watch tv I think of during COVID, that's what we were doing. You, troll social media. You make stuff on TikTok, you share images on Pinterest, so there might be Art Deco images, but they're shared electronically. So I think a lot of it is done digitally, done electronically and not, in a super social setting, even though we call it social media, but then there's still the old ways like nature, go outside, play sport, you know, go to

festivals and travel. So those things don't change, but I think that escapism... every time somebody turns on their phone and, and goes into whatever their favourite world is, that's their escapism today.

Tim Stackpool: Mm. I just wonder if it's more sort of that nostalgia of just wanting to reach back and, and relive the good old days, Inverted commas, I mean, we have to kind of remain a bit more objective about this, but I guess to be honest, if you are a collector, it doesn't really matter. It kind of just gives you the pleasure of, of acquiring something which you enjoy. Having it in your space.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yeah, that's true. That's true. And, and having the things that in this silly house of mine, everything's out. Oh, okay. So there's a lot, lot of stuff out because I wanna look at it all. I wanna enjoy it all. And, you know, valuable, not valuable. Doesn't matter. Because I collect from the heart, so if, if it speaks to me, then that's, that's important. And, and that's, that's why it's out.

Tim Stackpool: The issue I have in terms of collecting art is that I run out of wall space

Claudia Chan Shaw: Oh, hello. Me too. And, and, and the ...

Tim Stackpool: and the worst thing is, and, and the great shame of so much art around the world is that it's stored in crates in storage facilities.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yes. Yeah. I know.

Tim Stackpool: Talking about Art Deco collections, I mean, that really does take space because I guess with what you have at home, you need bench space. You need shelf space, not just wall space.

Claudia Chan Shaw: And display cabinets.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. What sort of advice would, could we get from Claudia Chan Shaw in terms of what we choose to acquire, what we choose to collect, and how important it is when we do collect that stuff to make sure we've got somewhere where we can appreciate it on the shelf.

Claudia Chan Shaw: being a tin toy collector, I understand the value of the mint in box, for instance. Where you don't take that little toy out of the box, you never play with it. You never look at the secret instructions or whatever it might be, and you've got mint in box. Bully for you. Honestly. Enjoy it. Take it out, have a go, have a giggle, wind it up, enjoy it. So there, there's all sorts of different collectors. I collect for the value of the piece. Say somebody collects for value, someone collects for nostalgia. I'm a big nostalgia, you know, tv nut. The things that I, I grew up with childhood memories and things like that. So many, many different levels of collectors for my personal experience collect it because you love it. Mm-hmm. If it happens to grow in value, that is fantastic. It might be the cheapest thing on earth. It might be some weird shell you found on a beach and you are trying to, you know, get, get the set.

It's whatever rows your boat really. I think that things should be enjoyed. Some people have a very solitary experience of collecting. They just do it and they, they put it away and they just know they've

got it. But I'd, I'd rather see it and enjoy it and experience and, and I always think that it doesn't matter if something is really valuable or not.

It's about how, if it speaks to you, but whatever it is that you wanna collect. Do your research, like be the expert on it, whatever that thing is. And then you'll know if you are, you are buying something that's genuine or aspirational or it's gonna be a holy grail and you'll never have one. But just, just know what you're looking at and, and you may start off and you don't know, as as I didn't, I just gathered things 'cause I thought they were cool. And then the more you learn, the more of an expert you become. And, um, you, that sort of, Ah ha! That's part of your arsenal as a collector.

Tim Stackpool: I'd like to ask you about contemporary relevance in this respect. And I read a lot of essays online, and the word that comes up a little bit about Art Deco, and I don't think this is true, it talks about how it's timeless. I don't think it's timeless. I think it's very, very much indicative of a certain era. And I think to actually say it's timeless kind of indicates that it is somewhat generic in a way.

But it's real relevance and importance I think is because it does indicate a time where we, what we talked about before, glamour and optimism and all that sort of stuff, and that's what looking at these objects remind us of, and it's important to remember the historical relevance for that reason.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yeah, I think you're right. And timeless also means that it doesn't look out of place in a more contemporary setting. So that, that definition of timeless makes it fit, I think because if we're looking at the clean lines. That makes something look modern in inverted commas and it's, it's very good taste that makes it fit and be timeless. But, I reckon it's, it's pure style and, and style's always in fashion. That's, that's why it fits.

Tim Stackpool: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. But I like to see how things contrast with the environment that they're in.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Mm. That's what makes

Tim Stackpool: them stand out.

Claudia Chan Shaw: It does, because it's, it's not today.

Tim Stackpool: And it

Claudia Chan Shaw: wasn't knocked up. It wasn't knocked up.

And, you know, and, and Flatpack and, and Alan keyed. It's, it's, and there's nothing wrong with, with that either. But, um, this is. It has got a lot of thought, a lot of design, a lot of integrity good craftsmanship. And it does speak of a, of an era. I mean, you look at those beautiful women, you know, on tippy toes, leaning back with arch backs, holding a ball of lights. Glorious. That's aspirational. That's beautiful. That's really lovely.

Tim Stackpool: And, and this is one of the great reasons, you know, recalling all that sort of art. Why it's so good to talk about this hundredth anniversary, since that first Paris Exposition on Art Deco. But before we finish up, Claudia, what have you got in the pipeline coming up? You talked about doing those tours. Have you got other things like that coming up?

Claudia Chan Shaw: Yeah, I do, I do. So I do a series of tours with Renaissance Tours and therefore the Art Gallery Society, the Art Gallery of New South Wales. And I've got two on the books for next year, 2026. So, in January there's a Singapore Art Deco to Art Now. And we'll, we'll see all these wonderful places I was talking about Tiong Bahru, which is that incredible streamlined modern suburb we will visit. Now you, you're asking about art deco and its relationship to now, Singapore and it's where we do our final dinner. And it's like, you know, and here's the party trick:

The Atlas Bar. And if you ever go to Singapore, go to the Atlas Bar, which is this huge beautiful soaring ceiling bar and restaurant. And it's based on the Chanin building in New York now, the Chanin building was built in 1929. There's that year again, and the detail inside is spectacular. Muscular men in friezes and glorious light fittings.

Dancing antelopes trailing across the ceiling. Everything you imagine Art Deco in its decorative phase to be. And this Atlas Bar has all of those elements in it and the group walks in and looks up and goes, oh my God. Oh, believe it. So, the purists might call it art, Art Fako or Deco Echo, but it's magnificent.

So that's Singapore. And we'll also, of course, do the wonderful galleries and Peranakan culture and um, great food and then moving back a little bit in time from gaudy to Guggenheim. Art Nouveau in Spain in May next year. Lovely. Yeah, that's a beauty. Very nice,

Tim Stackpool: lovely stuff.

Claudia Chan Shaw, thank you so much for, joining us on the podcast. It's great to have that discussion with you and I look forward to perhaps catching up with you again sometime.

Claudia Chan Shaw: Thanks