

# Art Deco in Music Hall Recalls

## Roxy's Ban on Nude Statuary

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By ROBERTA B. GRATZ

In 1932, when the interior decoration of Radio City Music Hall was being completed, the theater's manager, Sam Rothafel—best known as Roxy—came in one day and ordered the removal of all the nude statuary.

Nudity, said he, was an outrageous offense that he would no more tolerate in the decor of the world's largest theater than in one of its extravagant productions. Artists picketed the theater in protest, the press had a field day but the master movie entrepreneur banished the sculptures to the basement.

Temporarily.

Today the great period palace opened its doors for the New York Art Deco Exposition—an event that will include a retrospective of 1930s films—and the disputed statues will be found in their originally intended places. There is William Zorach's "The Dancing Girl," Gwen Lux' "Eve," Robert Laurent's "Goose Girl"—all lyrical ladies of the era and probably the first sculptures to be cast in aluminum.

The man responsible for their rescue soon after Roxy banished them was the same man responsible for their being commissioned and, in fact, the man primarily responsible for the design of what today is considered one of the great Art Deco interiors.

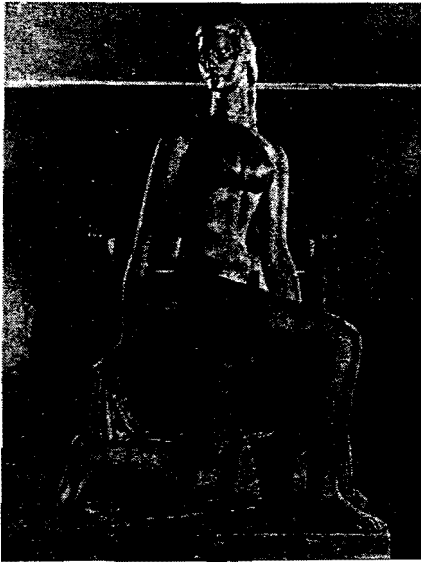
Donald Deskey, an early modern designer and one of the first to make artistic use of industrial materials, was commissioned by Rockefeller family architects to design the hall's interiors. Now 80 and still an industrial designer here, Deskey recalls the Roxy incident with amusement.

"When I was first called in," Deskey recalled, "Roxy told me he wanted the place to be Portuguese rococo. He was the Napoleon of the whole operation but I told him it would be rococo modern. Yes, he was pleased with the final results even though it wasn't like movie house architecture of the day, which was either Renaissance or Chinese Grauman."

Reached by phone in Florida where he is vacationing, Deskey added with a laugh: "Except the sculpture which I had to rescue from the basement with the help of the architects."

Art Deco is the current rage, the front-window favorite in antique stores and the latest chapter in the nostalgia blitz. The style which burst on the scene with the 1925 Decorative Arts Exposition in Paris is primarily characterized by hand-crafted metal objects with varying geometric designs.

"The Music Hall," Deskey says, "was really the only thing I ever did that could really be considered Art Deco." In fact, he adds, that was not really his choice—"it was set by the architects." He preferred the cleaner, less curvy lines of modern and it was his idea to commission



"Dancing Girl," by William Zorach, shares a place in Radio City Music Hall's main lounge.

works for the theater by the modern artists of the day, including Stuart Davis, Kuniyoshi and Georgia O'Keefe.

The current exposition, which lasts through Sunday, brings together Art Deco dealers from around the world selling everything from furniture to toys, art objects to clothing. There is a 1930s amusement arcade, famous automobiles of the era and there will be performances of ten '30s films, including "King Kong," "Top Hat," "Gunga Din" and "Jezebel."

The renewed interest in Art Deco amuses Deskey, who identifies himself as "one of the earliest American modern designers, starting in the 1920s. My interest was machine-age design, the idea that everything could be designed from the tube or the angle."

Deskey. They were still new in 1932 but, Deskey says, "modern was very much in the air and the impact of the Bauhaus was being felt." Born in Minnesota, Deskey studied architecture and painting and was set on the artist's life—he even exhibited here and in Paris—until a 1924 visit to the Bauhaus inspired him to concentrate on design. In the late 1920s, he designed tubular furniture, radios, airplane interiors. In the '30s, there was a Steinway grand piano, an early prefabricated house, buildings at the '39 World's Fair, teaching the first college industrial design course at NYU. His uninterrupted industrial design career even includes the currently used New York City street light.

Deskey had been brought to the attention of Music Hall architects who included Wallace Harrison, a Rockefeller favorite, by Abbey Aldrich Rockefeller—a founder of the Museum of Modern Art and mother of Nelson, David, Laurence, etc.

"She was one of my earliest clients," Deskey recalls. He designed some rooms in her W. 54th Street house using cork, bakelite and formica with inlaid aluminum for walls.

Her recommendation of him for the Music Hall assignment carried weight, Deskey says: "She was a real behind-the-scenes operator on that project."

The aluminum furniture, patent leather upholstery, mirrors, cork walls, formica trim—all are Music Hall