

Museum Shows and the Market: Two Art Deco Examples

by Jeanne Schinto

When the Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann retrospective was on exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 2004, the trade took notice. Christie's, for one, highlighted Ruhlmann at its June 15, 2004, sale one week after the Met show opened, and its timing was rewarded. Two record prices for Ruhlmann were set, for a table (\$388,300) and a lamp (\$421,900). For all Ruhlmann pieces sold, the total was \$4.3 million, almost triple their estimate of \$1.6 million. The figure also represents more than a quarter of the sale's gross. (All prices include the buyer's premium.)

The Delorenzo gallery on Madison Avenue was the high bidder on the lamp. The gallery didn't own it for long. At 35 inches tall, with three arms in silvered bronze and strings of silver beads cascading from its apex, it was identical to two lamps in the Met's show. Resold within weeks, it went to London collectors who had seen its twins on display in the museum, said Adriana Friedman, the gallery's director. "We purchased the lamp at Christie's, and due to the fact that we had it on display at the same time as the Met exhibit, the lamp has been sold," she said without equivocation.

Ruhlmann at the Met, Ruhlmann in your shop, Ruhlmann out the door. Can the trade always assume a direct, reliable correlation between prominent exhibitions and sales? Many people do, and have for years. An anonymous commentator wrote in *The Magazine Antiques* in July 1985: "The Orientalist exhibition held last year at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., sparked renewed interest in Orientalist painting and set the stage for Sotheby's record sale [\$1,265,000 on May 22, 1985] of *An Intercepted Correspondence, Cairo*, by John Frederick Lewis (1805-1876)."

In July 1980, in our *own M.A.D.*, a report on the Garbisch sale of May 23-25 contained these words: "This is part of a chain of events," said William Stahl, Sotheby's American specialist, trying to explain the success of the sale. In the last four months, he said, there have been a number of museum events that have influenced the market, and he mentioned, among others, the *In Praise of America* exhibition at the National Gallery and the opening of the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. "In this context the high prices for Americana make sense," Stahl said."

The Ruhlmann exhibition offered us an opportunity to discuss this common notion with several long-established Art Deco dealers in New York City, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. We also spoke with one author/dealer, one curator, one pioneer collector, and one auction house department head. We used the other major Art Deco museum show of 2003-2005, *Art Deco: 1910-1939*, as a point of comparison. It's not a scientific study, to be sure, but from it emerged a number of credible observations about how much or how little someone in the trade can reasonably expect museum culture to boost commerce.

Ruhlmann: Genius of Art Deco originated in France at the Musée des Années 30, Boulogne-Billancourt. For American and Canadian museum-goers, it was first reconceived and enlarged by the Met and by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, where it ended its run on December 12, 2004. The first retrospective of the designer's work since one was mounted at the Louvre in 1934, it featured the whole range of Ruhlmann objects—dressing tables, cabinets, mirrors, carpets, textiles—as well as artifacts from his working process—sketchbooks, wallpaper sample books, full-scale working drawings, and floor plans.

Tony Fusco, author of several books on Art Deco and founding president of the Art Deco Society of Boston, said of the Ruhlmann masterworks on display, "They were really museum pieces when they were being created, so it's no surprise that they're museum pieces today. Finally, here's an Art Deco artist who is being accorded the same kind of stature as a Gauguin. All the auction houses are scurrying to get all the Ruhlmann pieces into the market that they can."

Fusco's term "scurrying" is telling. Nobody who saw the Ruhlmann show expects to pick up any stray Ruhlmann at Brimfield. Audrey Friedman (no relation to Adriana Friedman), co-owner of Primavera Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York City expressed differently the same basic economic truth. "When something becomes really hot, and you can sell it at almost any price, those same things become almost impossible to find. It's part of the way things work." It's an irony, Friedman said. It's also a paradox. A major museum retrospective both stimulates the market and kills it for everyone except the rarest of dealers and clients. Ruhlmann at the Met, Ruhlmann in your shop.... But Audrey Friedman, unlike Adriana Friedman, can't complete the rhythmic triad, because she has no Ruhlmann available for sale at this time.

Well then, how do museum culture and the market work at other price levels, especially when it's a market as broad-based as Art Deco? What, for instance, happened to the market as a result of *Art Deco: 1910-1939*? The first show to stress the style's global impact, it presented an extraordinarily wide range of items, from French Art Deco in the luxury craft tradition of the 1920's to streamlined American Art Deco for the masses of the 1930's. A 1920's Ruhlmann dressing table here, a 1930's Sears, Roebuck & Co. outboard motor there. In between, a René Buthaud vase, a daybed by Eileen Gray, a bracelet by Jean Fouquet, and a Norman Bel Geddes cocktail shaker, not to mention all manner of objects defined as Art Deco from India (Indo-Deco), Japan, China, Mexico, and the countries of Africa and South America.

Organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the exhibition opened in Toronto in March 2003. From there it went to Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum and San Francisco's Legion of Honor before ending its run at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston on January 9, 2005.

When asked his opinion about museum shows, market trends, and Art Deco, James Zemaits, director of Sotheby's 20th-century design department, repeated what others have said. "The Met show absolutely did affect the [Ruhlmann] market, at least it affected the upper one percent of collectors. And it continues to stir the pot."

Zemaits could not, however, make a similar statement about the V&A show. In his view, the effect varied distinctly from region to region. Boston, for example, was "a bit of a mismatch" for the show, at least in terms of the market, he said. "Boston doesn't exactly have a very aggressive Art Deco collecting community...The Americana market is so based in New England, it weakens the heartbeat. I would say Boston is one of the weakest Art Deco markets in America." So while he thought it was good that the show went there, it was easier to see a relationship between the show and the market in San Francisco.

Zemaits attended the West Coast opening. He wasn't alone in describing it as "a mob scene." "While moneyed old-world San Franciscans are every bit as conservative as moneyed old-world Bostonians, there's a bigger tradition of Art Deco in San Francisco than there is in Boston," he said. "There were 1920's patrons of Art Deco, like socialite Templeton Crocker, who worked with [Jean] Dunand, [Paul] Frankl, and [Rembrandt] Bugatti. A lot of young collectors in their thirties and forties in San Francisco have descended from those families. I have seen them buying more frequently. I had five or six people from San Francisco buying in my June auction," during the V&A show's March-July run out there, "and they were first-time buyers."

Los Angeles-based dealer Dennis Boses, owner of Off The Wall Antiques, said that the show "absolutely had an impact on the market" in California. Asked for a specific example, he had no trouble calling to mind this one: "We brought the forty-eight-inch version of the Nocturne blue-mirrored radio to the San Francisco Deco to Sixties show in June." Designed in 1936-37 by Walter Dorwin Teague (1883-1960), it was in the museum exhibition, along with a smaller version by Teague called the Bluebird. Boses was asking \$68,000 for the Nocturne; it sold. The couple who bought it were fresh from having seen the identical piece in the museum. "And they were new collectors. That puts a very interesting spin on how much that show is actually doing to revitalize the market," Boses said.

Eric Menard, owner of San Francisco's Decodence, told us that he sold a Nocturne radio to a new collector too. He also sold to another new collector a \$2500 Auguste Bonz bracket like the one in the exhibition. "The people knew what they were looking at because they had been to the show," said Menard.

Not that any museum should care about market effects, but surely it cares whether local residents, its ready-made audience, will be inclined to attend a show in any significant numbers. So we wondered why the V&A show had come to Boston in the first place. John W. Axelrod, an acknowledged landmark collector of Art Deco—he began buying in 1970 when the term was barely known—said the show came to Boston because of him.

"The Victoria and Albert contacted me when they were organizing the show and wanted to borrow some major things that would have been the core of the American part of the exhibition," Axelrod told us. "And I said, 'I want Boston to have a crack at the show, and in fact I'm very inclined not to lend unless they get it.'"

Tracey Albaini, the organizing curator for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston show, confirmed the fact of Axelrod's influence. "John was a major part of the bargaining, yes," she said. "He is a passionate collector of Art Deco works of art. Amis enthusiasts is contagious. John is an overseer at the museum and has been for several years. And obviously when the Victoria and Albert approached him, he expressed interest, and it made perfect sense for the Museum of Fine Arts to take the show. It was John encouraging [museum administrators] who fully supported the concept that made it all work."

When Axelrod speaks of Art Deco, he means the best of American Art Deco, not mass-marketed American items, and certainly not Ruhlmann or any of his French contemporaries. The American pantheon is well represented in the ten items that Axelrod lent to the V&A show, including a chrome-plated table lamp by Donald Deskey, a Paul T. Frankl Skyscraper bookcase, and a KEM Weber Airline chair. A Jazz bowl by Viktor Schreckengost, a gift from Axelrod to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1990, was also part of all four exhibition venues.

In Axelrod's view, the museum exhibition will not much affect this blue-chip market, "because there's so little stuff available." Call it the Ruhlmann effect. A museum show may produce passion, enthusiasm, and awe, but it cannot produce more objects. "If [New York City dealer] Greg [Nanamura] got a great piece, he has a list of ten people to call," said Axelrod. "He doesn't need an eleventh person on that list." (Nanamura, speaking for himself, said, "It would be very difficult for a young new collector today to buy a collection as important as John's.")

Tony Fusco, whose book *Instant Expert: Collecting Art Deco* (2004) was published in time for the V&A show's opening in his home base of Boston, agreed with Axelrod and Nanamura that American Art Deco is not an "entry-level market" anymore. "People who went to the V&A exhibit saw a Cassandre poster that's already over ten thousand dollars, if they wanted to buy it," he said. "They saw the Skyscraper bookcase that's already fifty thousand dollars...So the collecting field for Art Deco is already a mature market, and this exhibit is marking that maturity."

In the past, there were equivalent exhibitions that marked the emergence of Art Deco as a collecting field, and the market acted differently. *High Styles: Twentieth-Century American Design* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 1985 was the first one. It was followed by *The Machine Age in America: 1918-1941* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York City in 1986 and *American Art Deco* at the Washington, D.C., Renwick Gallery in 1987.

Each exhibition had a profound effect on the market, said Fusco, and other observers said the same, adding that the cumulative effect was even more potent. Fusco singled out, in particular, *The Machine Age* at the Brooklyn Museum of Art as "an explosion." "After that show, there was an immediate response in the market," he said. Industrial art was "suddenly collectible"—microphones, radios, machines, and all sorts. Fusco noted that Palm Springs-based dealer and show promoter Jacques Caussin sold a German-made *lawn mower* in 1988—its salability as an objet d'art directly attributable to the Brooklyn show, according to Fusco.

By the time the Metropolitan mounted *American Modern, 1925-1940: Design for a New Age* in 2000, the American Art Deco market was in its adulthood. Major collections such as Axelrod's and John C. Waddell's (the basis for the Met show) had already been formed. The market was also old enough to have been through cycles, and it was on an upswing again. Perhaps that moment was the best time to see culture and commerce in conflux.

James Zemaits, who worked at Phillips during the New York run of the show, said, "The Waddell show jumpstarted the resurgence in an American Art Deco and Modernism without a doubt. I built on that show when I first joined Phillips. [He went to Sotheby's in 2003.] My first auction there was a tribute to that show."

Axelrod, too, recalled that auction as a golden moment. "James set the world on fire by doing Deco at Phillips," he said.

But the market can be affected by museum shows in less resplendent ways, indirectly. If Ruhlmann and his market equivalents in American Art Deco are put beyond the reach of most collectors, the next tier may get a boost. Audrey Friedman named André Sornay (1902-2000), who was not represented in the V&A show, as one who is being given a closer look. "We could, until a few years ago, find interesting pieces of his at moderate prices," she said. "We could sell a nice small table for six to eight thousand, and a great console for fifteen thousand. Now prices for Sornay have tripled, and this is true for a number of other designers who are a few notches below Ruhlmann."

In this category she named Jules Leleu (1883-1961) and Dominique, the French firm founded by André Domin (1883-1962) and Marcel Genevrière (1885-1967), neither of which were represented in the exhibition either. "Their prices have also risen quite sharply, especially if they have sharkskin, parchment, lacquer, and other embellishments," she said, adding that collectors should be careful of "flea-market Art Deco" that has been "gussied up by a few unscrupulous dealers abroad."

Gary Calderwood of Calderwood Gallery, Philadelphia, who deals in Ruhlmann, regrets that he never got a chance to see the Ruhlmann show at the Met. He particularly regrets having missed seeing the drawings and other evidence of Ruhlmann's creative process. But even without seeing the show, he was conversant in it, from having read about it in press reports, which are, inevitably, also part of the process. As for how much all of this has influenced Calderwood Gallery's sales, he said he couldn't say for sure. "Everything like that is cumulative. It raises consciousness, increases awareness."

*J. Stewart Johnson, a member of the curatorial committee for the exhibition, wrote a catalog essay, "A Note on Ruhlmann's Name: J.-É. Or É.J.," in which he discusses the variations. "There is no general agreement as to what we should call Ruhlmann," he writes.

"During his life-time he was referred to as both Jacques-Émile and Émile-Jacques and since his death the problem of which is correct has confounded scholars, collectors, and dealers. Indeed, it is reflected in the exhibition on which this book is based: both the Musée des Années 30 and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts refer to him as Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on the other hand, uses Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann. There is much evidence to support both usages." *Ruhlmann: Genius of Art Deco*, edited by Emmanuel Béron and Rosalind Peppall (2004), page 146.

The Terms

The first use of the phrase Art Deco as a style label occurred in France in 1966, according to editors of the V&A show catalog, *Art Deco: 1910-1939* (2003). The occasion was an exhibition whose title, *Les années '25: Art Déco/ Bauhaus/Stijl/Esprit Nouveau*, was taken from the title of the 1925 exhibition *Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris*. A government-sponsored trade show, not a museum show, the Paris exposition was host to about 16 million visitors during its six-month run. Its purpose was to celebrate designs by Ruhlmann and other artists working in the French luxury craft tradition. It was not, as many believe, an introduction to the style that came to be known as Art Deco; rather, it was a culmination—a showcase of the style at its zenith.

From there, the style evolved in a variety of ways, and new phrases to describe these new manifestations were coined. Modernism and American streamline are a couple of the more familiar ones. Twentieth-century modern is Greg Nanamura's preference for what he sells. Yale University Art Gallery, for its part, named its current exhibition of American 1930's design, on view through June 5, *Livable Modernism: Interior Decorating and Design During the Great Depression*. John Axelrod said he would like everybody to use a single term for now.

"Let's assume, for the time being, since there's such an uneducated mass, that anything between the wars is Art Deco," he said. "Then in ten or twenty years, we can start splitting hairs."

A word on pronunciation: Primavera Gallery co-owner Audrey Friedman, we noticed, pronounced the term Art Deco two different ways. Her explanation helps define in market terms the extraordinarily broad category that Art Deco is and what the term Art Deco has become. "I would say that under a certain price range, you say Art DEH-co," she said, "and if it's over a certain price, it becomes ART deh-CO."