The Mediterranean DECO: from international models to national variations

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This presentation is a bit like a mosaic of which all the pieces have not yet been casted into cement, contrary to some beautiful mosaics, which I shall present to you later. Consider it as a work in progress. Benefiting from the numerous works of Mercedes, Ezio, Antonio, Wassily, Claudine, Casamémoire, Robert Saliba’s *Beyrouth 1920-1940* (a very interesting work from the point of view of applied arts), Cecilia Pieri’s *Bagdad Art Déco*, and given with my one researches, I would like to propose a few of my reflexions to open a discussion around the following main question: What could be the specificities of an original Art Deco architecture in the South Mediterranean region?

Nothing is clear concerning the definitions of Deco architecture on the international level. Anthologies underline the disparate character of various examples grouped under the « label » of Art Deco. Even more disparate are those grouped under the term of the Modern Movement (as we discussed it during the last meeting of working group 1 in Liverpool). Deco architecture is associated to the conquest of new industrialized technologies, as exemplified by the Chrysler Building’s steel arrow by van Alen or more widely, to the Modern Movement. As Antonio Bravo Nieto underlines in his introduction to the work he coordinated and to which many of you have participated, *Arquitecturas Art Déco en el Mediterraneo*, a filiation certainly exists between the geometric tendencies of Art Nouveau architecture, the Secessionist movement and, I would even add, the Werkbund. The chronological limits are neither clearly defined: the *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* held in Paris in 1925 doesn’t mark the beginning but rather the apotheosis and even the end of Art Deco, if one believes the words of Jean-Paul Bouillon published in the *Journal de l’Art Déco*. However, according to certain exegetes, the main theme of the different tendencies of the Deco could reside in « interior design », exemplified during the 1925 exhibition by two antagonist pavilions: Le Corbusier’s and Pierre Jeanneret’s *Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau* and Pierre Patout’s and Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann’s *Pavillon du Collectionneur*. It is this definition and particularly the contributions of applied arts that I shall try to follow in this presentation on Art Deco in the South Mediterranean region.

**International models**

There are many witnesses of an international Art Deco architecture in the Mediterranean region, of which one can say they illustrate the process of importing foreign models for vanguard programmes such as cinemas: the Metro Goldwyn Meyer in Cairo and Alexandria, the Rialto in Casablanca by Pierre Jabin, the Rex in Thessalonica designed by architects trained in Paris.
Antoine Selim Nahas, trained at the Ecole Centrale in Paris, then at the Fine Arts, masters the vocabulary of international Deco that he implements in Cairo, particularly in the Mahmoud Unjuzad building (1937), a sort of Caireene Flatiron, or in the villa Farid Shoucair (1934) in Aley in Lebanon, of which you can see the interiors. While he is still a student, he wins the competition for the National Museum of Lebanon together with Pierre Leprince Ringuet. Together, they design a Deco neo-pharaonic building with a classical plan inherited from the Schinkel School. The envelope is of yellow sandstone cut and the main façade is embellished of a tetrastyle portico with lotus formed capitals. On each of the sides, high narrow windows framed with cannelings characteristic of Art Deco. The ironwork entrance door is decorated with curled ornaments. Inside, a ceiling of glass slabs covers the patio.

Moustafa Fahmy (1886-1972), who graduated from the Ecole spéciale des Travaux publics in Paris in 1912, has left significant international Deco works: the Saad Zaghloul monument (1928-1931) in limestone from Aswan with exterior and interior polished lotus-shaped columns. The friezes of the incurved cornice align elongated triglyphs, which are uninterrupted by the figure of the winged Horus. An ironwork fence with diamond potelet points encloses the mausoleum. These two buildings seem to be inspired as much from Robert Jones Owen’s *The Grammar of Ornament* (1856) than from Pharaonic models. Fahmy also distinguished himself in the design of modernist Deco pavilions for the exhibition Parc, weather the present Museum of Modern Arts (1937) and its remarkable mitre arches, or the neighbouring pavilions.

Hassan Fathy himself, without being trained abroad, as he accomplished his studies at the Polytechnic School in Cairo, designed a few Art Deco projects between the end of the 1920’s and the beginning of the 1930’s, such as an exhibition stand for the cigarette entrepreneur Dafrawi at the industrial exhibition or the Casino Bosphore, that was located in Bab al-Hadid in front of Cairo Central Railway Station. And later, in the 1940’s, when he designed the Mausoleum for his brother-in-law, Hassanein, of mamelouke appearance, he drew certain details like this frieze with diamond shaped tips that one could find in an Art Deco decor.

Importation or partnership

One can distinguish two types of approaches through two different buildings. The first is the main post-office in Algiers, a key Orientalist monument (1910-1913), designed by French architects Jules Voinot (c. 1855-1915) and Tondoire. The typology of the facades resembles that of the Sednaoui department store in Cairo. It’s main facade is pierced by three monumental Moorish arches surmounted by a gallery with gminated columns. Tables of polychrome faience that bear religious inscriptions enhance the immaculate whiteness of the envelope. The box-office hall is of incredible richness, decorated with faiences, paintings and chiselled stucco. The labour force was mainly Moroccan and Algerian and one remembers the name of Omar Gaga, plasterer from Guémar, little oasis in the region of Oued Souf, centre of expertise of chiselled stucco.
The extraordinary pastry shop Groppi in Cairo, located in a building that is more eclectic than Deco, designed by Giuseppe Mazza (1925), is the opposite of the product of an international team. As a total art work which owes nothing to local maître d'état, was received as a « Parisian » masterpiece. The multicoloured mosaics of the entrance were executed by the Venetian, Antonio Castaman, known to have participated in the restoration of the Colleone (1909) and to have worked at the Quinta da Regaleira in Sintra in Portugal. The glass ceiling of the circular hall of the restaurant, today destroyed, was the work of the artist Georges Jeannin (1884-1955), glass craft master in Nancy, owner of a fabric of artistic stained glass opened in 1909. And the rest of the interior decoration seems to have been designed by a certain Léon Cailler of whom we know very little.

What building and implementation practices does the execution of Western models imply? What are the links between importers and local partners? What is the collaboration with the maître d'état and what is the benefit from their know-how? If necessary, what are the back and forth movements and project adjustments? The subject is yet scarcely documented and only detailed sources can enlighten us. The Ambroise Baudry Archives revealed to Mercedes the names of some entrepreneurs, craftsmen and suppliers amongst which one finds very little Egyptians to which Baudry confides the earthwork and balât works.

The catalogue presenting the works of the Parisian ceramic fabric Gentil & Bourdet et Cie founded in 1905, accessible online, shows us a large national and international profusion of their production awarded in all the exhibitions in Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Adolphe Gentil and Eugène Bourdet, students of Victor Laloux at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts (Gentil will even graduate in architecture), renovate decorative ceramic and collaborate to the works of famous French architects of the beginning of the century such as Emile André, Henri Sauvage, Frantz Jourdain and Albert Laprade for which they execute the sandstone ornamental tiling, a form of opus incertum, for the Musée des Colonies (1931). They also collaborate with Azéma, Hardy and Edrei (1927) to the Boneyard (Ossuaire) of Douaumont inaugurated in 1932 and to the exterior decoration of the villa of Victor Erlanger in Alexandria (c. 1925). Were they meant to participate in the decoration of the Mixed Tribunals in Cairo for which the competition was won by the same Azéma, Hardy and Edrei? Or in the contrary, were there enough skilled local specialists in mosaic and ceramic covering, these balât craftsmen evoked by Mercedes?

In Egypt, many Italians practiced in the field of architecture, decoration and applied arts. Enrico Nistri (1871 - 1922), born from Pisa comes to Cairo in 1901 with his brother and creates the Nistri Brothers Decoration Company, one of the most important enterprises in the domain of decoration. The decorative repertoire seems of Arab influence. A publicity of his successor, the Greek Geo Zivanaki, presents Nistri as an entrepreneur in « Painting, decoration, wallpapers, furnishing, artistic strained glass, Lincrusta Tekko for mural tapestries, embossed leather, decorated leather, ceramics, all styles of artistic ensigns ». 
The effigy of Michelangelo cautions the decorator who’s agency is located at 3, Aboul Sebaa Street in Cairo. For one known name, how many unknown ones remain to be documented?

Plaster make-up

A whole current of art Deco, as it is also the case for Baroque architecture, really expresses itself through covering, weather coating, mosaic, graffito or painting according to the place. Sculpted stucco and the art of plastering are ancient know-how but still alive in the South of the Mediterranean. If cut stone is used exceptionally in monumental constructions, contrary to what can be seen in France were its ordinary use results from the long tradition of stereotomy, it is the plastering of the facades that characterizes Mediterranean architecture. This art of covering regains its popularity during the age of Deco : thanks to this cheap make-up, architects and entrepreneurs procure a modern look to their projects. Besides, Sayid Karim, Champion of the Modern Movement will totally reject the tartache tradition, he considers bastard, especially when some of his colleagues plaster concrete buildings.

Master plasterers, yet anonymous to my knowledge, execute amazing Deco decors that give a particular character to the buildings of Casablanca, Tunis or Cairo. If in Casablanca, known as the capital of Art Deco, many buildings conceived by foreign architects, mainly French, take into account the local art of stucco to create relief inlays placed under windows, above openings or as crowning. In Cairo, it is the entire envelope that is treated with plaster and enriched by decorative elements as cannelings, strikes, geometrised figurative motif like in the Rabbat buildings (c. 1920) constructed by the Azéma-Edrei-Hardy agency.

Gustav-Adolphe Hufschmied and Emil Vogt : the King David Hotel in Jerusalem

In the framework of my research on Charles Baehler, the Swiss King of Egyptian hotel business at the beginning of the 20th century, owner of the most famous palaces in Egypt, I discovered the decorator Gustav-Adolphe Hufschmied in regards to the execution of the project of the Kind David Hotel in Jerusalem. The construction of this hotel was commissioned in 1929 by the Palestine Hotels Company created by the Mosseri Family, who confided the execution to the architect Emile Vogt and to the decorator Gustav-Adolph Hufschmid (1890-1974), trained at the School of Fine Arts in Geneva (1914-1917), then at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich (1917-1918). After this episode in Egypt and in the Holy Land, Hufschmied also worked at the Maison Clarté and for architect Maurice Braillard in the 1930’s. The prestigious hotel, a sort of modern biblical palace, is inaugurated in 1931. In a stone envelope imitating the Italian palazzo, the interior should « evoke in a nostalgic way the atmosphere of the glorious period of King David ». Hufschmied designs the whole fantasist decor inspired by stylised motif copied from the excavations of the palaces of Ninive and Babylone. The capitals of the columns are of Assyrian, Hittite or Phoenician style. The walls of the rooms on the first floor are decorated of pomegranate, vine leaves and motif of David Star, details that have disappeared since the reconstruction of the building destroyed by a bombing. The furniture, which is still visible in some places, is part of the
work of a total interior design that Hufschmied executes for an elite of the roaring twenties. Could one say that an « Assyrian » Deco (inspired by the Werkbund), sort of matching to the « Egyptian » Deco, characterized this unique interior?

But what does one know of the execution of this decor? Who were the maîtres-d’état? Further investigations in Vogt or Hufschmied’s archives, which have recently been rediscovered are still necessary.

Appendice

Jean Royère

The interior designer Jean Royère (1902-1981), who’s archives are conserved at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, begins an international career as a decorator and designer in the aftermath of the Second World War by opening agency’s in Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, then in Lima. His work is enriched by his experiences abroad and he opens to new materials and expressions. The cultural intermix can be seen in several projects for the royalties of the Arab world, weather the projects of dining rooms for HM Ibn Seoud or King Faysal of Saudi Arabia, or the projects for the Shah and the Shahbanu of Iran. Royère adapts to the taste of his commissioners and integrates in his projects a Middle-Eastern tint: pointed arches, Moorish arches, lobed chair headboards, a stylisation of the Louis XVI style so appreciated by the royalties and the oriental social climber.