



Form and function

Brussels is laying claim to Art Deco in a year of celebrations

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The patinated copper dome of the National Basilica of the Sacred Heart glints from a hill in northwest Brussels, its shiny bulk dominating the skyline. Look up as you stroll about the streets of the Belgian capital and there it is, rising a mighty 89m, positioned atop a long brick and concrete structure flanked by two slim towers with fluted columns and their own small green domes. It's the largest Art Deco edifice in western Europe.

Take the metro out to the basilica and there, in an austere interior overlooked by modernist stained-glass windows, is the original 1:40 scale model of the church. It's the same maquette that won Belgian architect Albert Van Huffel the Gran Prix d'Architecture at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes held in Paris in 1925. The six-month expo of modern design and decorative arts spawned the term Art Deco.

While the basilica's first stone had been laid in 1905 by King Leopold II, who'd envisioned a grand Catholic church to rival that of Paris's Sacre-Coeur, World War I affected Belgium badly, draining its coffers and stalling grand construction projects. Huffel's combination of artistic design and affordable industrial materials embodied the Art Deco spirit.

Nevertheless, Belgium, broke, almost didn't take part in this forward-looking event, which turned its back on tough times and stipulated that all its entries, in all its pavilions, be modern.

What changed its mind? "Belgium needed to prove it had influence. The government realised the economic importance of the decorative arts," says Werner Adriaenssens, co-curator of Art Deco: Style in a Changing

Society. The exhibition is at the BELvue museum in the Royal Quarter of Brussels, and a new permanent gallery of Art Nouveau and Art Deco at the Art & History Museum, an iconic 19th-century building over in leafy Cinquantenaire Park.

Art Deco was the world's first global style. A marriage of art and industry, design and function, it favoured exotic motifs, streamlined shapes and repetitive geometric patterns. It was a logical evolution from the sinuous swirls and ornate floral imagery of turn-of-the-century Art Nouveau; a craving for order after war-time chaos.

Brussels is frequently hailed as a major centre of the earlier style, and in 2023 celebrated its Year of Art Nouveau. This year, to coincide with the 100th anniversary of 1925's seminal expo, the city is laying claim to Art Deco. A program of exhibitions, events, talks, conferences and film screenings, including Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* – 2025 happens to be the 100th anniversary

Villa Empain in Brussels, above; Flagey cultural centre, below; National Basilica of the Sacred Heart, above right; Van Buuren Museum and Gardens, top right



ry of the publication of F. Scott Fitzgerald's book about rich kids in the jazz age – has been running throughout the year.

"Which is clever marketing on Belgium's part, since Art Deco began in France then overwhelmed the world with modernity," says Adriaenssens matter of factly. "Art Deco came at a time of renewal and technological progress. It was a desire for beauty, functionality and identity in a changing world."

The exhibition at BELvue, a museum focusing on the history of Belgium, uses its three rooms to trace the movement's story. First up are exclusive objets d'art and sculptures by artists such as Marcel Wolfers and Oscar Jespers, whose white marble bust *Fine Pearl* (1925), a wraith-like female face, is considered a modernist masterpiece. Then come mass-produced pieces such as vibrant tableware, stools and tiles patterned with diamonds and chevrons.

The final room embraces modernity, with a display variously featuring aerodynamic hood ornaments, posters of Citroen cars and Sovocel electric motorbikes, and photos of Brussels' iconic Art Deco buildings. These include the Flagey cultural centre, former headquarters of the National Institute of Broadcasting, with its bronze tower shaped like an ocean liner, and the Van Buuren Museum and Gardens, a former private house with 1.2 landscaped hectares and an interior furnished with paintings and sculptures, and a piano that once belonged to composer Erik Satie.

Inspired, I decide to check out Brussels' Art Deco monuments. Armed with an Art Nouveau & Art Deco Pass, valid for three sites or exhibitions, a Brussels Card, which offers free admission to 48 museums, and a one-day BruPass for train, tram and bus travel, I set off.

It's only a five-minute walk from BELvue to Bozar,