

Japanese and Chinese Influences on Art Deco

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This paper examines the major role that Oriental art played in Art Deco furniture. This influence took two forms: materials, techniques, forms, and motifs that were borrowed from the Far East were either used directly or indirectly. Art Deco furniture which exemplifies direct borrowings are those works which specifically incorporate Oriental forms and motifs. Indirect borrowings are Far Eastern elements which became understood by French furniture makers as concepts and principles; such indirect borrowings were then used to create new Western styles, not simply imitations or copies of Oriental objects.

To demonstrate this I will focus on seven artists—Jean Dunand, Pierre Legrain, Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, Leon Jallot, René Joubert, Philippe Petit, and Eileen Gray. The first six of these artists were represented at the 1925 *International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts*. Eileen Gray, who did not exhibit in the exposition, was, however, working in Paris in close connection with these six artists.

The Société des Artistes Décorateurs was a professional association of architects, artisans, and designers founded in the aftermath of the *Universal Exposition* of 1900.¹ It was the artists from this society who created the artistic principles which led to the production of the Art Deco style. The society attempted to solve a broad range of problems experienced by French art industries when the machine and the division of labor had been introduced into the artistic process in the mid-19th century. The issues they addressed included cooperation between artists, craftsmen and commercial manufacturers, and the increasing international competition in the luxury goods trade of which France had been, traditionally, the leader. These issues led to a concentrated effort on the part of French designers to define and develop a modern French style of decorative arts, and were the motivation behind the 1925 *Exposition*. The works discussed in this presentation span a period of years surrounding the 1925 *Exposition* from 1910 to 1930.

Art Deco was influenced by Art Nouveau which flourished during the late 19th to early 20th centuries. Exploiting the organic forms found in nature, Art Nouveau from Belgium and France relied on the twisting, curving lines of flow-

ers and plants. After the 1900 *Exposition*, the floralism of Art Nouveau began to fall out of favor; however, its Austrian and German counterparts known as Jugendstil and the Wiener Werkstätte continued to develop into more geometric forms after 1902.

Art Deco has more in common, both stylistically and in principle, with this later vein of Art Nouveau. The underlying principle of Jugendstil and the Werkstätte was the desire to be decorative *and* functional, a principle endangered by the excessive ornament of the organic Art Nouveau as it developed in Belgium and France. In contrast, the German and Austrian styles were both symmetrical and geometric. It is a style that looked forward to modernism and the requirements of industrial production. Its association between art and industry actually determined the program of the Art Deco movement to come.

The general appearance Art Deco employs solid rectilinear forms, a simplification of lines, and bright color schemes. These appearances come from the underlying principles of Art Deco. For instance, the form of Art Deco objects must derive from function, and decoration must be an integral part of structure. Objects must also suit the conditions of modern life, which meant simple and functional furnishings with easy upkeep. In keeping with these principles, concepts from the Far East became appealing to Art Deco artists because they provided an approach to design which allows the form itself to become the decoration, especially in appreciation for the richness of the materials themselves.

Influence from the East entered Art Deco through three different veins of French culture in the form of motifs, concepts, and ideas. First, there was the influence Asia exhibited in previous artistic styles, including Art Nouveau. Second, in 1906 *Ballets Russes* debuted in Paris and as journalist Anthony Weller put it, “ushered in a craze for anything Oriental.”² Almost over night, the highly coloristic and sensual vein of the East identified with the *Ballets Russes* became decorative and fashion commodities. The ballet used Chinese characters as well as costumes and sets in Chinese styles.³ Third, because the production of luxury goods in France, as opposed to military armaments, was all but stopped due to World War

¹ Yvonne Brunhammer and Suzanne Tise, *The Decorative Arts in France: La Société Des Artistes Décorateurs, 1900-1942* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990) 7.

² Anthony Weller, “Antiques: Classic Accent of Art Deco: Sleekly Styled

Early Modern French Furniture,” *Architectural Digest: International Magazine of Fine Interior Design* (May 1984) 126.

³ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 287.

I, a new pattern of financial and trading relationships developed as industrial production outside of Europe increased dramatically, specifically as a new and greater influx of Asian products appeared.⁴

High quality, handcrafted Art Deco furniture must be considered luxury goods which were made for an exclusive clientele willing to spend considerable sums. For example, Art Deco scholar Victor Awars pointed out that “the average price of one of [Ruhlmann’s] beds or cabinets was frequently more than the cost of a reasonably large house.”⁵ Because of this, the cost of materials was seldom a factor in determining what the object would look like. It is also important to understand that Art Deco artists were often using many styles in conjunction with Oriental styles; they are not merely reproducing examples of Japanese or Chinese furniture since their clients could afford the originals. And, though the Orient had influenced earlier furniture including Art Nouveau, Art Deco approaches Oriental influences from different angles and in a new light from what had been done in preceding Western styles.

Direct influences of Oriental art on Art Deco are to be found in forms and motifs taken from Eastern art; these forms and motifs provide the most overt reference. However, because techniques and materials reinforce these visual elements, any discussion of Art Deco furniture which incorporates direct borrowings of them must also discuss the effect of technique and materials in enhancing those forms and motifs.

The most basic and traditional of Oriental furniture duplicated by Westerns is the screen. One of the earliest surviving screens is from a Chinese tomb. Dated 484 A.D., it is painted with lacquer on wood.⁶ Screens continue to be found in Chinese and Japanese interiors as commonplace furniture. Perhaps because of this Dunand created an extensive array of lacquered screens. And as is common with Oriental screens, Dunand decorated his screens using plants and animals (Figure 1). One example is a four-panel screen dated c. 1927. Wood with a black lacquer ground, the screen depicts herons and frogs using silver, pink and gold lacquer.⁷ Other than being simply a natural scene, the heron, in particular, is a common Chinese motif. It can be seen in a screen dated 1691 (Figure 2). In the Chinese screen the herons peck at mushrooms under pine trees; in the sky are stylized clouds. While the Chinese screen is covered by the picture, Dunand pared his scene down to 3 birds and a frog, thus leaving negative space and simple lines to distinguish land from water. Dunand’s screen incorporates multiple Oriental elements including the screen form itself, the lacquer technique, and the subject matter, yet is distinctively original in his use of space.

A cabinet was commissioned by the couturier and art patron Jacques Doucet and was a design by Pierre Legrain that

was lacquered by Dunand. Executed in a bright red lacquer, the cabinet has two doors that close by means of a pivoting pewter lock in a stylized floral design. The interior is comprised of twenty-four small file drawers in a lighter red lacquer. Frederick Brandt, from the Virginia Museum of Fine Art, speculates that “judging from its unusual design, and the fact that it was a commissioned piece, the cabinet was likely intended to hold certain of Doucet’s business records.”⁸ Supporting this is the fact that the cabinet resembles a Japanese functionary chest. Functionary chests were a special kind of ledger chest in which important documents of feudal domains and local officials were kept. Although functionary chests vary considerably in style, the basic design generally has a square front, double doors opening to multiple drawers, and heavy metal fittings.⁹

Clearly, the technique and design of Legrain’s cabinet are Japanese. However, the metal fittings on Legrain’s cabinet are not as extensive or elaborate as those typically found on Japanese chests. In fact, they are not Oriental in style. Though the primary elements which make up the cabinet—its shape, doors, and general disposition of the drawers—are Japanese, some of the smaller details such as the stylized design of the metal work and the addition of metal feet give it away as a Western chest.

For the pair of bedside tables dated 1921, Dunand seems to borrow from a Chinese model (Figure 3). The design of these black-lacquered tables resembles a style used by the Chinese for a variety of small tables and stools, an example of which can be seen in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) stool (Figure 4). Paradoxically, the Chinese borrowed the cabriole leg from the West. Apparently, Dunand simplified the form, elongated the legs, and excluded the stretchers from them. In this way, he returned to the West the cabriole legs but retained the Chinese character in these bedside tables.

While Dunand directly used forms, motifs, materials, and techniques from Japanese and Chinese art, he combined these elements in ways foreign to Eastern artists. In that sense alone the furniture is original. In addition, he combined Oriental elements in conjunction with various Occidental elements. This mesh of East and West led to a varying degree of direct Oriental influences within each piece. Dunand brought Oriental art elements to the awareness of other artists of the *Société*, and from there the influence spread. Ultimately, the concepts and principles he learned and practiced became popular among Art Deco artists in general.

Examples of indirect influences from the Orient on Art Deco furniture include those pieces in which principles of Eastern art are incorporated rather than providing a simple imitation or borrowing of forms and motifs. Recognizing such in-

⁴ T.C.W. Blanning, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern Europe* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 183.

⁵ Victor Awars, *Art Deco* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992) 56.

⁶ Craig Clunas, *Art in China* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997) 39.

⁷ Anthony Delorenzo, *Jean Dunand* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985) 24.

⁸ Frederick R. Brandt, *Late 19th and Early 20th Century Decorative Arts* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1989) 218.

⁹ Kazuko Koizumi, *Traditional Japanese Furniture* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1986) 77.

direct borrowings must entail an understanding of Eastern principles and concepts as they relate to things like the technique of lacquering, the use of materials, and basic forms, as well as principles of decoration.

Natural lacquer is a resin extracted from two trees from the Far East.¹⁰ When collected and left to settle, impurities fall to the bottom leaving a flat, translucent liquid that hardens and becomes brilliant when exposed to air. Black is the foremost tone associated with the medium; a further range of colors can be achieved by the incorporation of vegetable dyes, though the palette is relatively limited. The second most common color is a brownish red.¹¹

In the hands of Eileen Gray and Dunand the technique of lacquering became an integral part of the Art Deco Style. As mentioned earlier, Lacquer was used with pieces of furniture which make reference to Oriental styles. However, Art Deco artists also used lacquer without making direct concessions to the Oriental style. Such is the case with a chair by Dunand and a screen by Gray. A very modern engineered look, Dunand's chair has a beige padded leather drop-in seat and a wood frame covered with brown lacquer (Figure 5). Dunand's lacquers have the best qualities of Oriental lacquer, but were refreshed by his artistic keenness and originality when he left the lacquer undecorated.¹²

The screen, by Gray entitled "Le Destin" of 1914, followed Oriental examples in terms of material and techniques, but in her design of lines and irregularly-cut segmental circles, she merely made passing references to Japanese aspects.

Through Dunand and Gray lacquering spread to other artists in the *Société*. Even Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, who worked almost exclusively in wood, collaborated with Dunand to create a few pieces in lacquer including a dressing table and chair (Figure 6). A table with stools set by Legrain and a cabinet by Leon Jallot, both with strong reference to industry and machine-made objects, were also lacquered.

Inlaid materials were commonly used by Japanese and Chinese furniture designers; they used many semi-precious materials including mother-of-pearl, carnelian, jade, ivory, quartz, lapis lazuli, agate, turquoise, and coral.¹³ Art Deco artists recognized the qualities and the stylistic advantages of using these materials and began to incorporate them in their own work.

They began using exotic materials from all over the world including inlays and woods from the Far East. Dunand revived the spectacular Oriental technique of inlaying particles of crushed eggshells. This method had already been used by the Japanese to highlight decorative details on sword-hilts and

scabbards, but there is absolutely no doubt that Dunand was the first to use eggshell to cover large surfaces and to create white areas which could not be achieved with natural lacquers.¹⁴ As can be seen in a table by Dunand dated 1925, he covered entire screens or tabletops in the meticulous technique (Figure 7). Dunand also employed crushed eggshells on the dressing table designed by Ruhlmann (Figure 6). The effect achieved was that of a minute crazy-paving, each piece of eggshell set in by hand and separated by a hair's-breadth thread of lacquer.

While eggshells were the favored material by Dunand, ivory was the most popular inlay adopted by Art Deco artists. Used extensively by Ruhlmann, fluted ivory ribs, ivory feet, key plates or handles, or simple whorl or circle patterns of ivory dots set flush within the surface gave his furniture its single touch of contrast other than the veneers he used.

Art Deco artists also imported Asiatic woods. The amboyna and macassar ebony were often used. Extensively used by Ruhlmann, these exotic woods became diffused through the Art Deco community as can be seen in a cabinet by Jallot.

Even when Asiatic woods were not used, Oriental principles were still applied. Natural decorative motifs were created by taking advantage of the natural colors and textures of various types of non-Asiatic woods. Art Deco furniture follows the principle of simplicity in form, although rich in surface effects. The effects were achieved by exploiting the character of the various woods employed for their intrinsic decorative quality, sometimes in combination with inlay or other forms of decoration. A cabinet made of American burl walnut is one of several by Ruhlmann which are bare except for large metal locks. The locks, while depicting western style scenes, hark back to the heavy metal fittings on Japanese chests. Such large areas of unadorned material were rarely found outside Asia but were commonly used by Ruhlmann. Jallot's dining room table shows simplicity of strength and form and the heavy lines of Chinese furniture. The lines of the chairs are severe but beautiful.

Flat surfaces and proportioned masses are defining principles in the decoration of both Oriental and Art Deco furniture. Generally, Western tradition superimposed ornamentation and dominated material, while the concept of truth to materials was a long-standing Eastern tradition; Art Deco artists inherited this idea as a basic principle.

Though the overall visual effect of the furniture was modern, in a less obvious way Art Deco owed a lot to Oriental influences: the geometrical patterns and simplicity of form and honest expression of materials.¹⁵

¹⁰ Delorenzo 17.

¹¹ Philippe Garner, "The Laquer Work of Eileen Gray and Jean Dunand," *The Connoisseur* 183 (May 1973) 3.

¹² Gardner Teall, "Screens and Furniture by Jean Dunand," *Harper's Bazaar* (April 1928) 114.

¹³ Michel Beurdeley, *Chinese Furniture*, trans. Katherine Watson (Tokyo:

Kodansha International, 1979) 114.

¹⁴ Felix Marcilhac, *Jean Dunand: His Life and Works* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991) 174.

¹⁵ John M. Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 99, and Alastair Duncan *American Art Deco* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1985) 31.

Direct borrowing of Japanese and Chinese forms and motifs were laid over a typical Art Deco framework. Indirect borrowing of techniques, materials and stylistic principles filtered through the Art Deco community becoming an impor-

tant part of Art Deco's continuing growth. Both directly and indirectly Art Deco artists used Oriental art elements as a vehicle to reconcile tradition and modernity.

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Figure 1. Jean Dunand, *Herons and Frogs*, four-panel screen, wood with silver, pink, gold lacquer on black lacquer ground, 170 x 200 cm, c. 1927. Reprinted by kind permission of the Delorenzo Collection.



Figure 2. Chinese screen, lacquer on wood, 1691. Musée des arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris©Photo RMN.

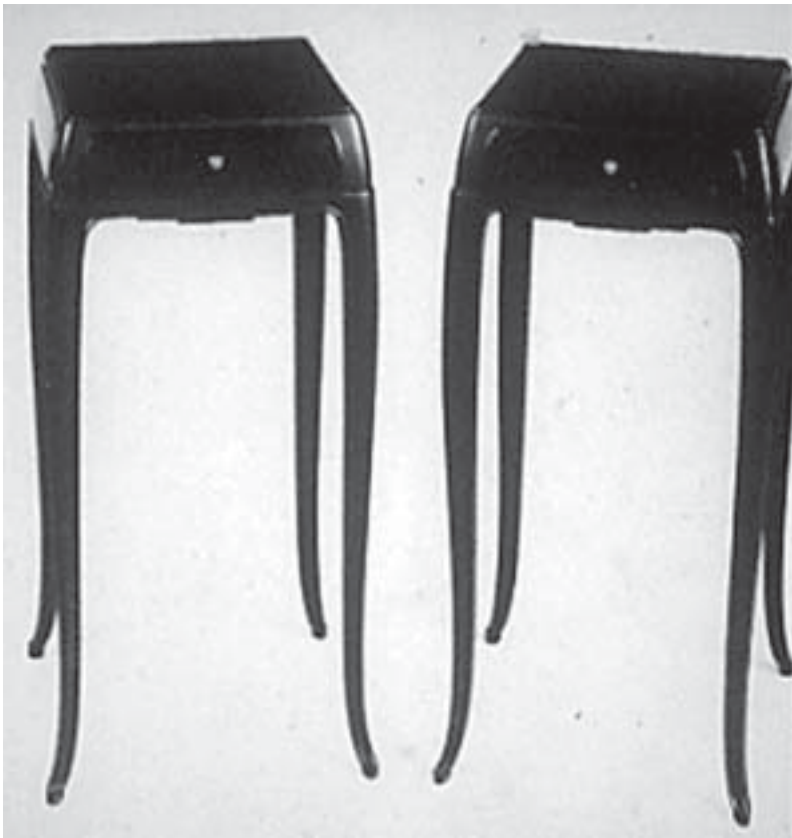


Figure 3. Jean Dunand, pair of bedside tables, black lacquer, height 80 cm, 1921. Galerie Vallois, Paris.



Figure 4. Chinese table/stool, lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, Jiajing period, 1522-66. Musée des arts asiatiques-Guimet, Paris©Photo RMN.



Figure 5. Jean Dunand, armchair, brown lacquer with beige leather seat, 67 x 60 x 55 cm, 1927. Reprinted by kind permission of the Delorenzo Collection.



Figure 6. Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, *Chinoise*, vanity table, black lacquer inlaid with white eggshells by Jean Dunand, 1927. Reprinted by kind permission of the Delorenzo Collection.

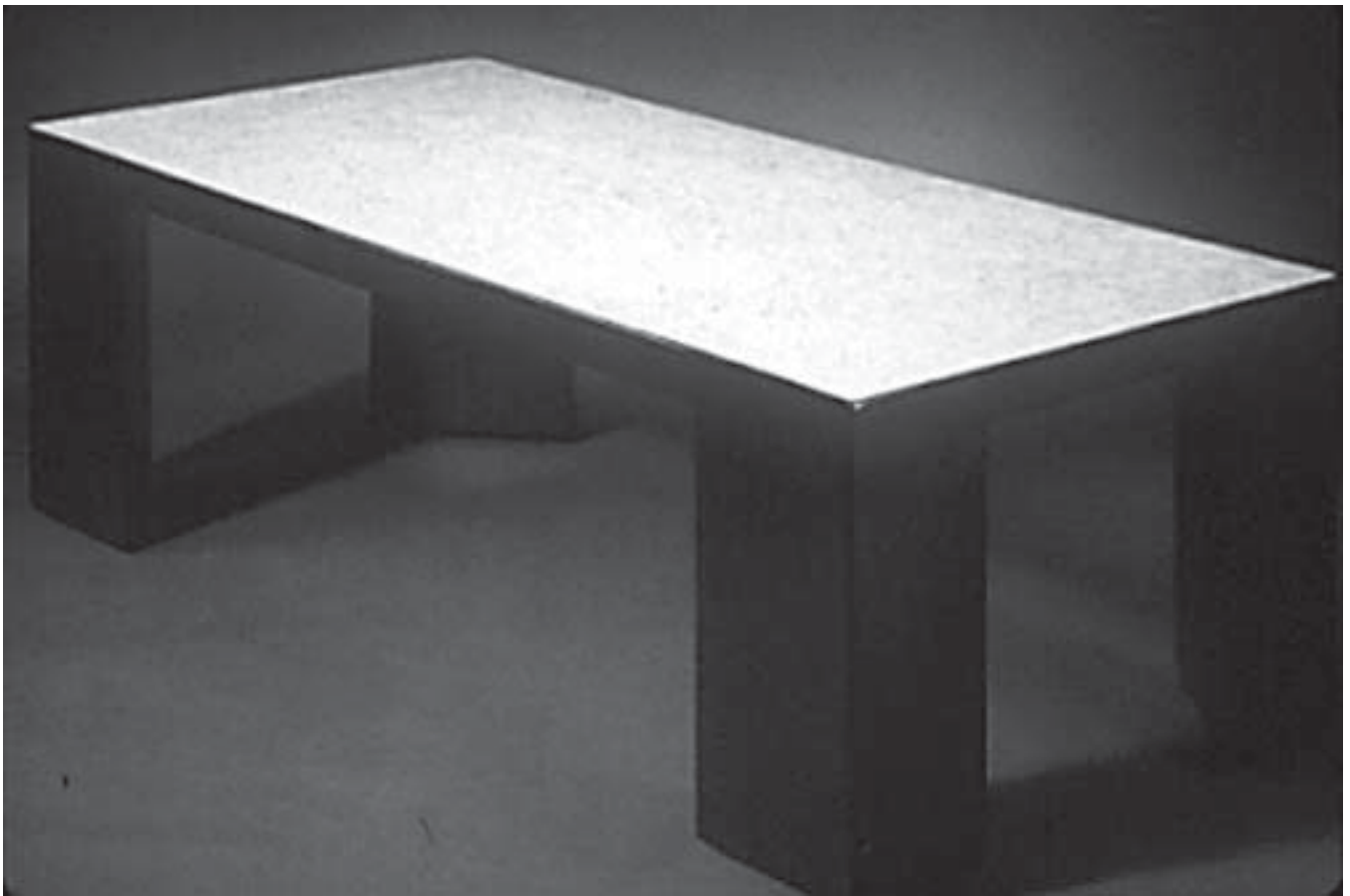


Figure 7. Jean Dunand, coffee table, black lacquer, top decorated with eggshell mosaic, 45 x 155 x 75 cm., c. 1925. Reprinted by kind permission of the Delorenzo Collection.