

RUY CASTRO - Rio Art Déco

RIO DE JANEIRO – From August 14 to 21, men and women from various countries will be milling about between Rio's skyscrapers, facades and monuments, visiting collections and exhibits, and exchanging exclamations of wonder and surprise. They will be the guests and participants of the 11th World Congress on Art Déco, to be held here. Rio has just been discovered as one of the last and largest strongholds of this... What was it?

Was it a school, a movement, a revolution? No, it's just a style. But so agile, original and self-sufficient that modernism, the parent movement that should embrace it, rejects it – and not a moment too soon. Art Déco – an acronym for Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, its probable birthplace in 1925 Paris – has, probably more than ever, votaries explaining its vibrant survival.

Why did modernists snub Art Déco? Because the style was never ashamed of its decorative function, while modernists, if allowed, would set furniture on fire; produced no pedantic manifests, like Futurism and Surrealism; it looked straight at practical issues. On the other hand, for quite some time now, Paul Klee has become wallpaper and Mondrian, dress print. Art Déco just landed on real life first.

From the 1920s to the 1940s, the style redefined the landscape of cities – in Rio, it inspired hundreds of buildings in the Downtown area, Gloria, Flamengo, Urca, Copacabana, Ipanema, Lagoa (many still there – beautiful). It has influenced the cinema, theater, photography and design; streamlined cars, ships and planes; gave kind of a new freedom to geometry; and did it all without ceasing to be art.

Rio may not have the largest Art Déco construction in the world, which is the Empire State Building in New York. But it has its greatest monument, the Christ the Redeemer statue, celebrating its 80th anniversary two months after the Congress to which it became the symbol.