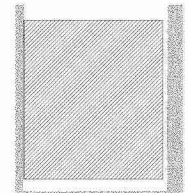


# ART DECO UNBOUND



BY RIGHTS, THIS ARTICLE SHOULD HAVE BEEN A CELEBRATION of the gallerist and dealer Ric Emmett's colossal achievement, an authoritative 567-page book documenting American art deco furniture. Instead, it is a memorial. Emmett died, unexpectedly, of a stroke in April as we were preparing to publish the following excerpt from his book. At the time, he was immersed in the second volume of this life's work, a documentation of art deco lighting. A remarkable researcher, Emmett had devoted, in his words, "four hours a day for 43 months" to the first volume, and he was well launched in the research on the second. His widow, Iza Emmett, plans to complete it.

Emmett was a pioneer in the world of selling modern design and certainly—especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s—alone in this kind of venture in his hometown of Miami. Though the movement to preserve art deco architecture was born in Miami Beach and was already strong by 1979 when he started, little was known about the furniture that had filled these and many other buildings; there was almost no scholarship, except for academic work on Works Progress Administration and other government-sponsored Depression-era art and design. Our knowledge base has grown exponentially in the past four decades, but the field is still plagued with questions and misattributions, which were an invigorating challenge for Emmett.

*American Art Deco Furniture*, published in a limited edition, offers proof of his success in rising to that challenge. In a way it is a designer-by-designer compendium, looking at the output of Paul Frankl, Donald Deskey, Gilbert Rohde, KEM Weber, Russel Wright, and others less well known. Emmett's aim was not merely to display the furniture but to document it. He sought labels, signatures, catalogue entries, advertisements, and patent drawings to prove pedigrees. He also uncovered a host of misattributions, among them a circa 1935 bedroom set by David Evans for the Widdicomb Furniture Company that is often thought to be Deskey's (but is not) as well as several chrome and leather chairs from the Lloyd Manufacturing Company that are commonly thought to be from KEM Weber but were not designed by him. Following is Emmett's foreword in *American Art Deco Furniture*, which chronicles his early adventures in the trade.

Beth Dunlop

Gilbert Rohde designed this vanity for the 3920 bedroom group offered by the Herman Miller Furniture Company in its 1939 catalogue.

Russel Wright's Roly-Poly cart of c. 1936 appeared in several movies, as well as in a Coca-Cola advertisement featuring actress Maureen O'Sullivan that appeared in the February 1938 issue of *Good Housekeeping*.



**A Pursuit and a Passion: Excerpted  
 from *American Art Deco Furniture***

*By Ric Emmett*

In the years after World War I, American furniture manufacturing was concentrated in the western portion of Michigan. The furniture manufacturers, located primarily in the Grand Rapids area, were producing revivals of historical styles: Hepplewhite, Elizabethan, Chippendale, William and Mary, Tudor, Sheraton, and many variations based on those styles called “updates.”

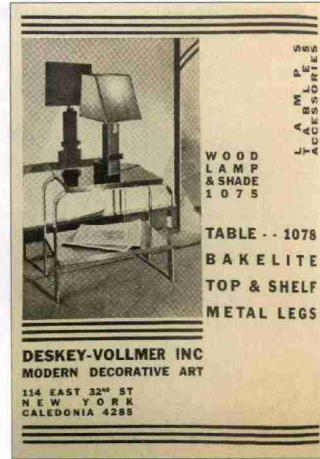
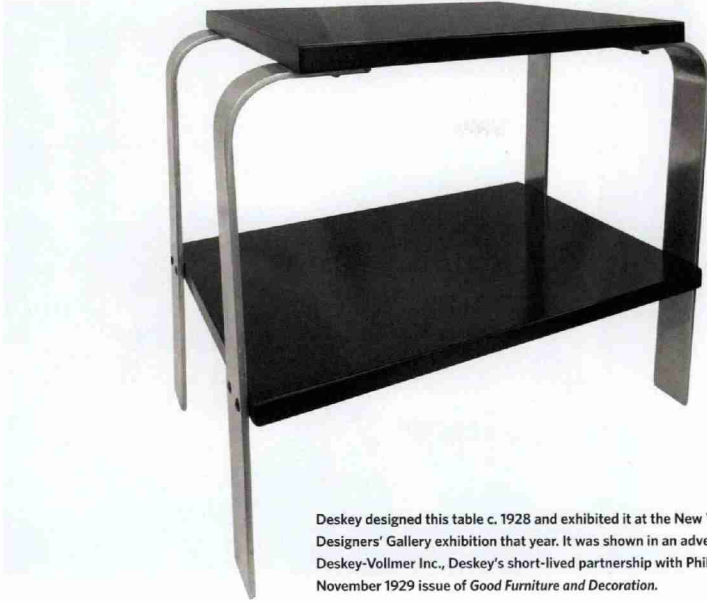
In Europe, however, particularly in France, Austria, and Germany, a revolution had been brewing in furniture design, and a major exhibition of decorative arts had been planned for 1915 in Paris, but it was postponed until 1925 because of the war. The exhibition was to promote modern decorative arts—with copies and imitations of old styles “strictly excluded.”

When the U.S. was invited, Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce for the United States, sent the organizers a letter saying we had nothing to show. While we did not exhibit, America did attend. A commission was organized to visit the exhibition and report on it. American architects, designers, and wealthy buyers all came. While in Europe, many of them visited the Bauhaus in Germany and saw the new style in Austria.

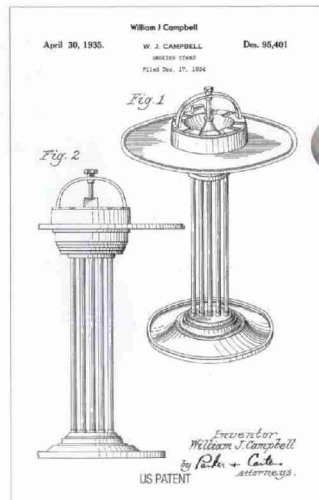
The commission also arranged for about four hundred of the items from the exhibition to have a traveling show at eight American museums,

Donald Deskey designed this arm- and side chair for the Ficks Reed Company of Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1933. The firm also produced designs by Paul T. Frankl, Helen Park, and Isabel Crole.





Deskey designed this table c. 1928 and exhibited it at the New York American Designers' Gallery exhibition that year. It was shown in an advertisement for Deskey-Vollmer Inc., Deskey's short-lived partnership with Philip Vollmer, in the November 1929 issue of *Good Furniture and Decoration*.



The only known art deco design by William J. Campbell, this cocktail smoker stand was patented on April 30, 1935, and produced by the Climax Machinery Company of Indianapolis, Indiana. The circular top ring can be removed to serve drinks; the ashtray has a lifting device to deposit spent ashes into a tube to be emptied.



giving the general populace an opportunity to see them first-hand. Exhibitions at Macy's, Abraham & Straus, Loeser's, Wanamaker's, and Lord & Taylor followed. The story continues with the designers and furniture makers who took this European idea and created a uniquely American deco style in architecture, automobiles, and art.

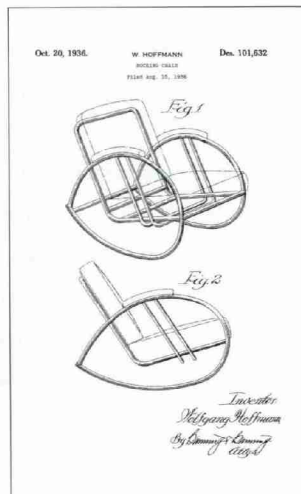
My adventure with American art deco furniture and lighting began in 1979. With my partner, Robert Poncetti, we had opened Gemini Antiques and had just received a container of art deco furniture from France. An older man came in the gallery and after looking over our wares inquired if we had any American art deco. I, in my ignorance, answered, "There is no such thing."

A year or so later a picker brought in a great looking black lacquer and aluminum table. I asked who made it, he said, "Deskey." I thought he meant Desny, a great French design company, so I bought it. A few days later another customer came in and asked how much I wanted for the Deskey table. I tried to correct him that there was no "key" in Desny. He explained that the table was by Donald Deskey, the great American art deco designer who had designed Radio City Music Hall interiors.

So there was an American art deco style in furniture. In time I got to know about Deskey, Paul Frankl, Gilbert Rohde, KEM Weber, and two score of other American modernists who gave America an art deco style. This book is an account of some of the pieces of American



Designed by Paul T. Frankl in the 1930s, this blond mahogany side table was exhibited at the 1939 World's Fair in New York and published that year in Emily Genauer's *Modern Interiors, Today and Tomorrow*.



Vienna-born Wolfgang Hoffmann, son of Josef Hoffmann, came to the United States in 1925 and from 1934 to 1942 worked for the Howell Company in Illinois, for which he designed this chromed steel, leather, and lacquer rocking chair. It was awarded a U. S. patent in October 1936.



Frank's "stick willow" furniture for the Ficks Reed Company included this armchair designed in 1929 and pictured in a company advertisement in *Good Furniture and Decoration* in January 1930.



art deco that I have owned, appraised, or photographed over the past thirty years. In 1979 I owned two books on art deco—*The Spirit and Splendour of Art Deco* by Alain Lesieutre and Katharine McClinton's *Art Deco, A Guide for Collectors*; both dealt with French art deco. Then, a world opened up...period books and magazine articles written by Paul Frankl, other period books covering American output in the late 1920s and 1930s. Magazines: *Art & Decoration*, *Architectural Forum*, and a host of others.

My travels took me to New York, where I met other dealers in American art deco, the legendary pioneers of research and the sale of American art deco furniture. Alan Moss and Mark [McDonald], Mark [Isaacson], and Ralph [Cutler] of Fifty/50 all helped and encouraged me.

In the early 1980s a few dealers began to form an unspoken mutual assistance society. There was no criterion for membership. Some, like Chuck Zuccarini from Detroit, were strictly interested in deco. Some, like Les Thompson from Atlanta, bought and sold postwar designs as well as art deco furniture. Others, like Tom Sajovic from Chicago, sold American golden oak.

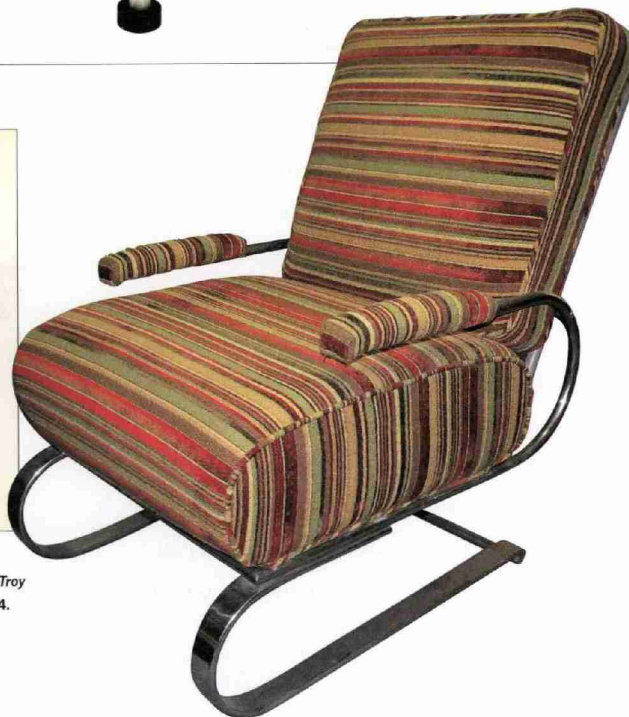
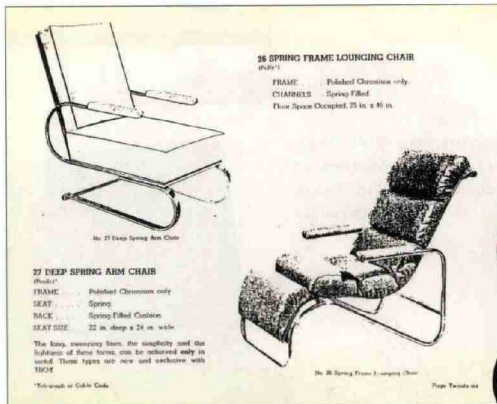
Our combined library for research fit into a plastic milk crate in Les Thompson's old red van. Then Chuck Zuccarini proposed a road trip. I would fly to Detroit and we would drive in his van across the state to Zeeland, Michigan, and visit the Herman Miller Company and maybe get to look at their archives. We were amazed. They gave us all the catalogue pages,



Rohde's adjustable lounge chair for the Troy Sunshade Company is no. 22 in the firm's 1934 and 1937 (shown here with the matching ottoman) catalogues.



In 1933 Warren McArthur designed this chaise longue with an aluminum frame for use indoors and out at the Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix, Arizona, designed by his older brother Albert Chase McArthur and opened in 1929. This production model remains in original condition.



Rohde's Deep Spring armchair for Troy Sunshade was offered in the firm's *Troy Streamline Metal, Designed by Gilbert Rohde, Made by Troy* catalogue in 1934.



a copy machine, and told us to be out by 5 PM.

Don Coclough, then known as “Cadillac Jack,” had some copies of Troy [Sunshade] and Lloyd [Manufacturing Company] catalogues, which he shared. Knowledge grew and was shared. We were like a band of brothers searching for information, trading knowledge, and giving tips. There was, of course, a profit motive; we had to sell our finds to fund our next purchase and to keep going, but a bond of comradeship existed.

In the early 1980s we were all pretty poor and everybody wanted to exhibit at the Miami Beach Antiques Show despite the fact that the show owner looked at deco dealers as an affront to “real” antiques dealers; we were crammed together in a side room where we wouldn’t infect legitimate dealers.

As I was the southernmost dealer, my house was the designated “camping ground.” My wife, Iza, had to put up with twelve to fourteen deco dealers sleeping on sofas, beds, even under the dining table. At night stories and tall tales abounded, and books were pulled out to prove a point. My young daughter, Jennifer, grew up with an annual invasion of curious, ribald, and interesting people; in the end, she too entered the trade.

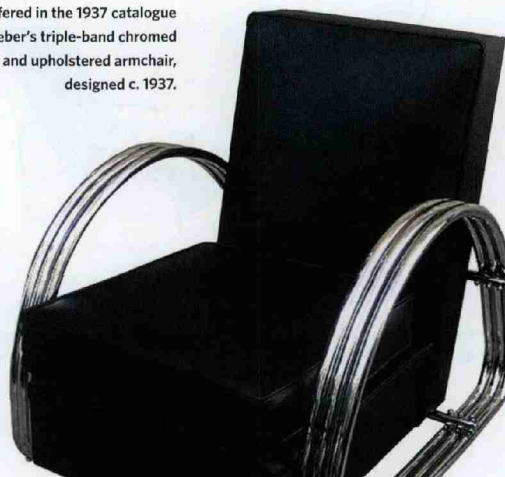
In doing research for this book I uncovered quite a few pieces of furniture and lighting that have been misidentified in auction catalogues, books, magazine articles, and by dealers (including myself). I have endeavored to correct these mistakes in the book.



KEM Weber designed this chrome and enamel three-shelf table c. 1935 for the Lloyd Manufacturing Company in Menominee, Michigan, which offered it in its 1935-1939 catalogues. Seen here is the page from the 1937 catalogue.



Also offered in the 1937 catalogue was Weber's triple-band chromed steel and upholstered armchair, designed c. 1937.





The designer of these aluminum andirons in the form of the Trylon and Perisphere, symbols of the 1939-1940 New York World's Fair, has not been identified. They are marked "CBC."

Weber's dining room set for the Grand Rapids Chair Company, c. 1928, included not only the table and chairs but also a sideboard, vitrine, and serving table, as seen in a company photograph. The set is enameled in sage green with touches of silver leaf and walnut.

