

RAMSEY COUNTY
History
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Ramsey County
and Its Early
Courthouses

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Fall, 1993

Volume 28, Number 3

**Newly Restored, Newly Renovated—
The City Hall and County Courthouse**

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Memorial Hall and the God of Peace, restored so that they shine once again in all their glory in the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. See articles beginning on page 4. Photo by George Heinrich.

RAMSEY COUNTY HISTORY

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An Award-winning Team



Ramsey County History has been awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the American Association for State and Local History. Above (from left) are some of the Editorial Board members who guide the publication process: Priscilla Farnham, executive director, Ramsey County Historical Society; Thomas C. Buckley; Virginia B. Kunz, the magazine's editor; John M. Lindley, Editorial Board chairman; Thomas H. Boyd; Arthur McWatt; and Thomas J. Kelley. Not pictured: Charlton Dietz, Laurie Murphy, and Dr. Thomas B. Mega. Photo by Richard Strom.

What IS Art Deco?

In 1977 the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse was designated a St. Paul Heritage Preservation Commission site, deemed worthy of preservation as an outstanding example of Art Deco design in architecture. Although Art Deco influenced the design of America's urban buildings for only about a decade, today those buildings are called treasures to be preserved.

The answer to what is Art Deco and where it came from is contained in the following adaptation of a brief history of the Art Deco movement by the design firm of Wold Architects and Engineers.

Art Deco traces its unique style back to Art Nouveau and the Wiener Werkstatte founded in Vienna in 1903 by Joseph Hoffman. In 1919 the Wiener Werkstatte opened a branch in New York City. In 1923 the work of another German designer, Hans Poelzig, was reported at length in *The American Architect*. His innovations and his refinement of indirect lighting and its theatrical applications became a signature of the Art Deco skyscraper style. The emphasis on dramatic lighting as an important element of design is nowhere more apparent than in the city hall and county courthouse in St. Paul.

According to the Wold report, the American version of Art Deco grew from two basic influences: the works of Louis Sullivan and of Frank Lloyd Wright. Along with Sullivan, it is important to mention Holabird and Rouche (the earlier name of Holabird and Root) and Burnham and Root. Both firms were included in the "Chicago



Bronze bas relief designed by Wold Architects and Engineers and embedded in the sidewalk at the Fourth Street entrance to the city hall and county courthouse.

School," which was principally responsible for the evolution of the American skyscraper.

Sullivan developed the use of classical overall massing with detailed and highly organized ornamental surfaces. He also developed the strong vertical piers with recessed windows and spandrels which would be characteristic of Art Deco. Holabird and Rouche were instrumental in developing and refining the steel skeletal frame and its technical integration into the skyscraper concept. Frank Lloyd Wright developed the strong abstract and geometric ornament that was an integral part of architecture.

The 1925 Exposition des Arts Decoratifs in Paris became the catalyst that, in sending the message that Modernism was in, energized American architecture and design. American envoys from industry, architecture, design, and crafts came in large numbers and the effect upon their return to America was pervasive.

The high point of American Art Deco is thought to have been the exhibition, "The Architect and the Industrial Arts," which opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City just months before the 1929 stock market crash. The exhibition is recognized as the finest American example of Art Deco. Eight American architects participated. Each created a complete room setting and designed the furniture, furnishings, artwork, and accessories which then were produced by leading manufacturers. Two of these architects, Saarinen of Detroit and John W. Root of Chicago, were interviewed by the St. Paul City Hall and Courthouse Commission during or immediately following the exhibition.

Several Twin Cities buildings erected during the 1930s were influenced by the Art Deco style. In addition to the city hall and courthouse, the former Women's City Club building (now the Jemme building) at St. Peter Street and Kellogg Boulevard and the Rand Tower in Minneapolis are extraordinary examples of the style. The First National Bank of St. Paul and the Lowry Annex, now the City Hall Annex, also reflect the Art Deco influence.

—Thomas J. Kelley

drawn.

"... It was found that there was not even a blueprint of the old building, so blueprints were prepared ... showing the amount of space occupied by each department, its growth and various functions performed by each employee, and the

relation of those functions to other employees. On the blueprints every desk and even every hat rack was located.

"Vault space was studied in such offices as the Register of Deeds, Clerk of the Probate Court and Clerk of the District Court and the number of records that existed 50

years ago was ascertained and the increase in those records over a period of years and up to the present time was likewise charted. From the experience of the past the vault requirements of the future were projected on charts so that we could ascertain what would probably be needed twenty



One of the six sculpted ground floor elevator doors, created by E. R. Stewart for the St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse. See articles beginning on page 4. Photo by George Heinrich.

R.C.H.S.
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