
There are few cultural historians who can casually admit to being a scholar of both the Late-Baroque in Italy and Spain and twentieth-century Cuba. Yet, as odd as the two subjects may appear at first glance, there is a distinct connection between them that has guided Alessandra Anselmi’s research for the last several decades, and that is the Spanish community in the Eternal City and conversely Rome’s influence on Madrid and the Ibero-American world. Indeed, her extensive work on the cultural relations between Rome and Madrid eventually, and quite naturally, led her to Havana as if the three cities were seamlessly linked across a single body of water that encompasses the Mediterranean and Caribbean worlds alike.

The Cuban historian and critic Alejandro de la Fuente is fond of citing José Veigas’s disparaging claim that “Cuba has a multitude of competent art critics and curators, but ... [few with] any serious interest in history” (see, for example, his review of Abigail McEwen, *Revolutionary Horizons: Art and Polemics in 1950s Cuba*, *NWIG* 2018), and in that sense, Anselmi’s new book is a very much needed and welcome breath of fresh air for historical scholarship on Havana’s art, architecture, culture, and society in the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, *L’Avana déco* can be seen as two projects in one, the first being a richly illustrated and penetrating inquiry on the cultural life of Havana and the influence of Art Deco on all creative disciplines and levels of society. The second, and perhaps more revealing contribution, is her extraordinary depth of research culminating in profound annotations that are as robust and entertaining as the text, and a vast and comprehensive bibliography, both of which open multiple doors for future scholarship on Cuban art and culture.

The book opens with a comprehensive account of the scholarship of Art Deco globally, and an analysis of the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* (Paris, 1925), from which the term Art Deco was derived. This exposition resonated profoundly in Havana, inspiring several new projects and monuments throughout the city. Anselmi then probes deeply into the contradictions during the presidency and then dictatorship of Gerardo Machado (1925–33), when Art Deco particularly flourished in the capital. She carefully points out that the “luxury, glamour, and abundance” of an island that promised “Paradise” could also be seen as a superficial ornament of a merciless economic and social system (p. 91).

Architecture, the decorative arts, advertising, and patronage occupy most of the book, with Anselmi carefully charting the transition from theory to practice. She provides readers with an Oscar Wilde decorative epigraph, “Let
me be surrounded by luxury, I can do without the necessities," a clever quote that points to the pleasures and perils of architectural patronage in the newly planned and exclusive suburban districts of Havana. From here, she considers the first generation of Art Deco houses in Havana in the late 1920s and early 1930s, followed by the high-end residential architecture whose aristocratic patrons enthusiastically embraced the new style.

An entire chapter is dedicated to the extraordinary 1930 Bacardi Building on the edge of Old Havana. This exceptional polychromatic tower became the first important example of a fully Art Deco building by a major Cuban corporation, and an important symbol of corporate modernity on the island. There follows a brief consideration of the role that journals, magazines, and newspapers played in the diffusion of Art Deco, in which fashion, interiors, graphic design, decorative arts, and film are all seen as important elements of the metropolis of tomorrow.

Anselmi also explores housing in the form of high-rise apartment buildings and smaller residences for the middle- and working-class bourgeoisie. Multifamily apartment buildings were pervasive in Havana as were single-family houses. As she notes, rarely do we find such a rich Art Deco housing stock for middle- and working-class families anywhere in the world, encouraging readers to consider how important it is to restore and conserve these exceptional buildings in Havana.

The book’s final chapter deals with public and semipublic buildings and monuments, ending with the Memorial to José Martí in the Plaza Cívica (now Plaza de la Revolución) in the Vedado, a fitting conclusion to an exceptional and prolific period of art and design in the capital. If Art Deco in Cuba has been largely overlooked or dismissed by historians and critics alike, then Alessandra Anselmi reminds us that the Art Deco architecture and monuments of Havana are in fact an integral part of the city and its marvelous cultural identity, and that they deserve our greatest attention, care, and respect.

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