

Foreign Accents



It's not all highflying in this city of art deco delights



“Look up” is the adage often employed when it comes to studying the architectural gems of a city. It certainly holds up for Shanghai which, despite its reputation for having an ever-changing skyline, still houses thousands of structures that are testament to its rich history.

The Global Times joined a group of expats last weekend in craning its neck to discover some of the art deco splendor of the former French concession. The walking tour was led by Patrick Cranley of Historic Shanghai (www.historic-shanghai.com), a group that promotes the greater understanding of the city's building heritage and the culture and history surrounding it. After a couple of informative hours taking in iconic deco delights such as the Cathay Garden and Grosvenor House on Maoming Road South, and less well-known examples of the style such as the Belmont Apartments (254 Xiangyang Road South), the Global Times asked some of the participants for their impressions of the afternoon.

Patrick Cranley, Historic Shanghai co-founder, the US

Tina Kanagaratnam and I discovered that we shared a love of architecture when we first met, and have studied building styles wherever we have lived (Singapore, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., Beijing and Shanghai). We have lived longer in Shanghai than anywhere else (since 1997), and so have had time to delve deeper into its history and built



heritage. We were first introduced to Shanghai's architecture by long-time Shanghai resident Tess Johnston, who founded Historic Shanghai with us in 1998. We love all periods of Shanghai history and architecture, but we have a special fondness for art deco style. It flourished during an especially stimulating time (the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s) when China's exposure to international design and technology was accelerating, and foreign interest in Chinese style was also growing. And when we got involved in the world of art deco studies globally, it intensified our interest in the Chinese art deco style. Art deco is considered to have been the last “complete style,” in which just about anything could be designed in art deco style. We don't really pick out favorite buildings, because there are so many gorgeous ones! We try to make sure that the people on our art deco tours come away with a basic understanding of the elements and periods of art deco architecture so that they will recognize and appreciate it when they see it all over Shanghai, and elsewhere.

There's also a social element, as everyone gets to meet others who share their interest in Shanghai's history and arts. We also organize tours focusing on other themes, including the Bund, religious buildings, specific architects, and revolutionary history. Historic Shanghai will host the World Congress on Art Deco in November this year. Perhaps 200 art deco fans from all over the world will come to Shanghai, listen to presentations by experts and collectors, enjoy art deco-themed dinners and parties, and will go on walks to see Shanghai's art deco heritage up close. It's five days of art deco madness and it's a lot of fun.

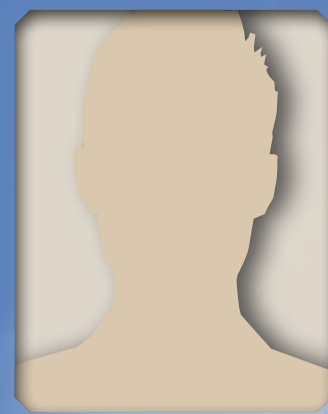


Mary, teacher, the US
I'm visiting from Suzhou for the day. I wasn't really interested in art deco, but I was interested in walking around Shanghai. There's so much to explore here, and this is a way to do it. Now I will walk around Shanghai and notice things. It's a good way to learn about the city. And it's really interesting. I went on another art deco walk before, and I met people who actually travel around the world on art deco tours.



Philip, academic director, the UK
I've just been here for about four months so I don't know very much about Shanghai, I'm still discovering it. My friend, who'd been to other events suggested this, and it sounded very interesting. It's been brilliant. I think a lot of the facades were very interesting – I'd noticed some of them before, but having the explanation about art deco was really interesting. And behind the Cathay Cinema – I didn't realize there was that big area behind there.

Gilbert, transportation engineer, Canada
I came along to get an explanation of the architectural styles and how they fit together. The main thing I learned is that nobody seems to stop you if



you wander into buildings and stairwells. I'm sure I'm going to get into trouble, but now it's like I can go into stairwells and alleys and peek around. This is the first of these tours I've been on. I'd like to look around other areas, as long as there is some history that ties it together, like maybe one of the water towns.



Ann, New Zealand
I live in Suzhou. I don't come to Shanghai so much, but since hearing about the art deco walks I've been down for a few. I like the idea of someone speaking about all the places. It's a good way of getting out and about, and making the most of being here. And it's good for when you have people visiting – you can kind of give them the tour secondhand.



Tracy, teacher, Australia
I came along for something to do, and I don't mind a bit of architecture. Getting to see these buildings in among all the modern Shanghai stuff is good, and seeing how it's all crowded in and you have to really look for it to find it. I was amazed by how the guide found all that stuff. I think I'd go on a walk like this again, depending on the subject.



Cathy, librarian, Australia
My friends told me how good the last art deco walk was. I've already bought three books by Tess Johnston, the founding member of Historic Shanghai, and done a number of her walks, so I'm very interested in doing these walks. I like learning about the culture from the past. I just like seeing how the old China was.

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(From far left) A typical art deco style as found in the Okura Garden Hotel on Maoming Road South; The China Baptist Publication Building on the Bund Photos: Adam Skuse/GT and CFP