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ART DECO ROAD MAPS, A Collectors Gallery

by **Bob French** (RMCA #235)

(Editor's Note: Additional map images referenced in the text appear on the Color Map Sheet enclosed with this newsletter)

A

recent touring *ART DECO* exhibition had particular relevance to this road map collector for the sense of déjà vu it evoked. Common themes in the exhibit echoed those shown on road maps. In fact, most road map collectors also possess a representative gallery of *ART DECO* images even though we might not be aware of it.

ART DECO is a slippery term that is easier to recognize than to define. It covers diverse forms ranging from Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture to French "Art Decoratif" luxury cigarette cases. It includes geometric "moderne" painting, 1930's stylized glassware and depression era post offices. Associated with the decades between the World Wars, and promoted by exhibitions in Europe and Chicago's 1933 Century of Progress, it reached its zenith at the 1939 New York Worlds Fair (*Socony Vacuum 1939, at right*). Fortunately, this corresponds with the most colorful and desirable period for road map collecting when covers represented a real world of streamlined service stations and modernistic Greyhound busses. Art forms included frozen fountains, sunbursts, zigzags and modern classical design. When applied to industrial design it resulted in airflow automobiles such as the Cord and Auburn Speedster and the streamlined locomotives of the late 1930s. Chrome plated toasters, colorful Catalin radios and even baloney slicers were among the mass produced consumer products that reflected the style. Singular architectural icons such as New York's Chrysler Building and Rockefeller Center, seen on a 1936 guide, endure to this day.



Silhouettes and Streamlines

ART DECO came of age in the 1920s, inspired by the 1925 Paris Arts Decoratifs Exposition. First examples revolved around jewelry, lamps and other expensive "objects de art". In America, print advertising democratized the art by applying it to more commonplace products - notably to sell automobiles. Road maps and their close kin, travel brochures, soon adopted the *ART DECO* themes. Early examples reflected traditional art forms that featured landscapes like the 1924 New Hampshire brochure and classical revival designs that could morph into a speeding car (Marathon 1938 and Richfield 1933).

Lithographic printing also played a role in the development of the art form because the process required separate color plates and a minimum detail as in the Catalina bird brochure of 1931 or the 1930 Deep Rock service station. Thus, bold simple designs in two or three colors prevailed. Ultimately

expressed in silhouette image, the 1931 Warner Quinlan redheaded beauty driving an open car presents a choice example.

Given Americans' passion for speed and travel, speedboats along with race cars and planes animated many covers including the 1931 Richfield (below) and 1936 Phillips.



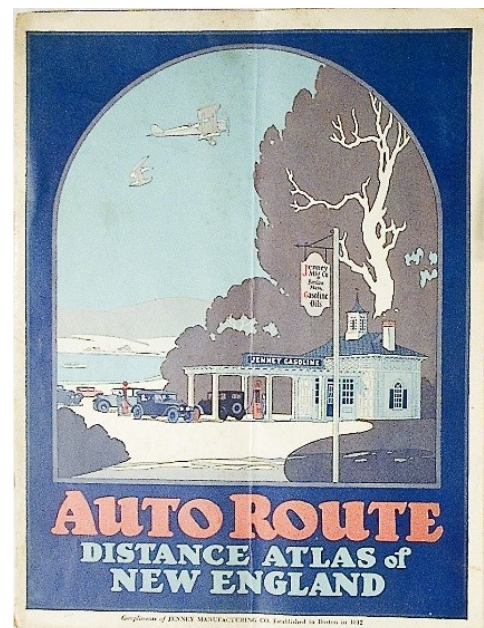
Speed and motion appeared in print as blurred streaks trailing from streamlined forms (Standard Indiana 1934 and Deep Rock 1936). When translated into architecture, horizontal lines and rounded corners could impart a sense of motion to solid buildings.

the soaring hopes for the future even during the dark days of the depression (Standard Indiana 1932). These became the dominant themes of Expositions of the 1930s.

Sunbursts and Ripples

In 1928 Shell Oil issued a colorful map depicting the golden scallop logo appearing to rise above the horizon. Perhaps it inspired the sunburst device that became an *ART DECO* hallmark. Three years later Colonial Beacon portrayed radiating roads as if rays of light. By the time of the 1930s expositions the sunburst not only appeared in print, but also served as an integral element of many forms of design and architecture (Standard Indiana 1933 and General Petroleum 1937). Futuristic cityscapes emerged at the fairs. A Chicago Surface Lines cover, worthy of a Buck Rogers scene, featured searchlights, rainbows and glass panels illuminated in colored lights.

More prosaic scenes at the time showed abstract landscapes, geometric designs, parallel ripple lines and eye-catching stylized trees (Tydol 1930, Jenney 1934, right, and Union 1936). The artwork, simple in form and bold in color, was both stylish and impressionistic. It blurred the line between true art and illustration. It contrasts with the photographic maps of more recent years, yet conveys an authentic sense of the times.



Roadscapes and Realscapes

While *ART DECO* illustrations depict idealized portraits, many became manifest in the real world. Sleek trains with streamlined locomotives did carry passengers to World's Fairs (New Haven Railroad 1939). A few relics of the *ART DECO* motor courts with their rounded corners, horizontal lines and glass block panels still survive (United Motor Courts 1939). Streamlined busses in their flo-paint are not so different from the ones today (Union Pacific 1939). Occasionally we find a streamlined diner or an *ART DECO* service station similar to the one depicted on a 1941 Kendall map. The pastoral landscapes, portrayed in abstract form on old map covers, are rare now as a result of suburbanization (Maine Official 1937-38).

Gulf produced one of the last *ART DECO* covers by representing Pittsburgh in 1947. A sunburstlike glow of light outlines the steelmaking furnaces. Clouds of brown smoke billow skyward framing a soaring skyscraper that rises as a phoenix from the ashes. When did we last pay homage to smoke and industry? How times have changed! Regretfully, the *ART DECO* period was so short lived.

To view a gallery of *ART DECO* maps referenced in this article, follow this [link](#)