

Politics of Style

Travel, Modernism, and the French Embassy

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In the Grand Hall of the French Embassy in Ottawa rests *La Grande Hermine* (Figure 1), a stylized bronze sculpture designed by French artist and engineer Jean Prouvé. Completed in 1939, the sculpture is a miniature representation of Jacques Cartier's legendary ship which guided him and his crew members across the North Atlantic and along the St. Lawrence River. On a colonial mission during the 16th century, *La Grande Hermine* assisted the expedition in claiming the region and settling in what would soon be called New France. Travelling great distances, the ship not only transported explorers and pioneers, but efficiently transmitted imperial notions of French civilization. Moving forward to the 1920s and 1930s, academics can appreciate other variations of cultural exchange between nations. For instance, while an official French delegation had already been established in Canada by 1928 at the Victoria Building (Figure 2), it soon became evident that the building failed to convey the strength of French national identity. Immediate plans were made to acquire new land and construct a custom-designed Embassy more befitting of a European world power during a period of late imperialism. I propose that the exportation of French nationalism during the interwar years was fulfilled through the efficiency of world expositions and ocean liners, culminating in the construction and designation of a new French

Embassy built in Ottawa between 1936 and 1939 (Figure 3). Drawing evidence from the progress of French modernity through colonial pursuits, I argue that the building offers not only a nuanced understanding of late imperial France and the politics of style in the interwar years, but also interestingly tells us something about Canadian nationalism at this time.

During the 1920s and 1930s, France was experimenting with an eclectic mix of classical and modern elements in architecture and interior design. Known today as Art Deco, this complicated period incorporated a flourish of geometric shapes, highly stylized figures, and streamlined effects. In an age of jazz aesthetic, leisure travel, and international relations, Art Deco was a modern, but not Modernist, visual mode.¹ Using world expositions, the design movement succeeded in promoting France as a global entity, staging French design for world consumption. Thus, by politicizing arts and culture, France used Art Deco to market an unusual but consumable product – its own national identity. For instance, the 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris was the government's first attempt to aggressively reinforce its rightful place as arbiter of good taste (Figure 4). Against the backdrop of social conservatism, an influx of expensive French boutiques and department stores helped the

government redefine post Great War reconstruction. Generating a desire for stability after the trauma of warfare, the restoration of urban centers essentially rehabilitated the French economy through its packaging of lifestyle.² Accentuated by the 1925 Expo, the spectacle of product consumption indicated a swift shift in twentieth century modern thinking.

Continuing this logic, succeeding world fairs and publicised events like the construction of the French Embassy became even more definitive of Art Deco and the packaging of French modernity. For example, in 1931, despite the onset of global recession, France mounted the Exposition Coloniale in Paris (Figure 5). Presenting France as an enduring imperial power, the government devoted the majority of its pavilions to the promotion of its own colonial pursuits. Essentially servicing the empire, this ethnographic display of “othering” demonstrated a commercial viability in French trade and industry during a tumultuous time. Design historians Bevis Hillier and Stephen Escritt state: “Art Deco was no longer solely exploring the relationship between tradition and modernity within the European decorative arts; the 1931 exposition mediates between the electrically-powered conservative modernity of metropolitan France and the ‘primitive’ art traditions of the colonies.”³ While France was not literally colonizing the Western world, it was nevertheless using world expositions and Art Deco inspired projects in an attempt to reinstate itself as the economic leader of modern arts and culture during a time of late imperialism.

Necessitating a separation between the colonizers and the colonized, imperial powers traditionally perpetuate a relationship rooted in racial supremacy. Frequently, this is accompanied by the promise of universal Western liberation by means of capitalistic venture. However after the surge of nineteenth century capitalism, this act of “civilizing” was not

only limited to racial exploitation, but disseminated through various forms of dominance supporting urbanism, economic growth and national stability. Nezar Al Sayyad, professor of architecture and urban design states: “if we accept that the underlying tendencies of urban development are colonialists, and if we understand colonialism as part of the modernist project, then we must argue for the broadening of the meaning of colonialism.”⁴ With this reasoning, France utilized the Art Deco movement to reassert its late imperialistic identity by constructing a colonial association with culture.

A similar logic presents itself outside of world expositions in a comparable study of ocean liners. Facilitating the transportation of passengers between metropolitan centers and their global peripheries, ocean liners developed into politicized vehicles of accessibility. Depicted in advertisements, their speed symbolized technological progress, presenting international travel as a privileged equivalence to modernity.⁵ Nevertheless, however large and powerful they were, these ships were not just technologically equipped for transatlantic travel. Rather, they were recognized for their commercial viability, and outfitted as floating exhibitions of comfort and luxury.⁶ France, alongside other Western countries, also took advantage of the North Atlantic route by investing in the *SS Normandie*, a short-lived but well-known passenger ship during the 1930s (Figure 6). Effectively juxtaposing technological ingenuity with style, the French government publicly funded the production of the ocean liner as a means of endorsing the French nation. Upon entering service in 1935, popular magazine *l'illustration* was quoted praising the vessel as: “un chef d’œuvre de la technique et de l’art français.”⁷

Exhibiting a luxury that few could afford, the First Class Salle à manger was an impressive palette of silver, lavender, red, and gold,

measuring 305 feet in length with a towering 28 foot ceiling (Figure 7). Despite having no immediate access to natural light, the room was illuminated by cascading Lalique torchieres and repeated rows of glass “lozenges” affixed to the walls, casting an ethereal, warm glow upon the travelling guests.⁸ Dripping with excess, the *Normandie* encouraged an already politicized Art Deco movement. As a promotional tool of the French Ministry of Fine Arts, its transatlantic mobility subsequently bore some similarities with the country’s prior colonial pursuits. Just as *La Grande Hermine* brought French culture to New France, the *Normandie*, along with other ocean liners, exported Western identities on a global scale. Yet, like most liners at the time, the *Normandie* became a commercial failure. Too grand and unable to make a profit, the French government was forced to regularly subsidize the program so that it could remain competitive with other North Atlantic Ocean liners.⁹

As the commercial viability of ocean liners declined due to the effects of the Great Depression, Western countries considered alternative ways to globally export their national identity. Following this logic, by recognizing the progression of foreign diplomacy during the interwar years, Embassy architecture effectively assisted and improved government affairs and their economical pursuits. Ceasing to exist as temporary social establishments, embassies instead became permanent structures. Permitted to anchor themselves on neutral soil, today they foster a mutually beneficial relationship between heads of governments and their citizens.

Despite the economic downturn and international tensions experienced during the interwar years, the French government spared no expense in building and furnishing an Embassy destined for a newly autonomous Canada. After the success of Expos 1925 and 1931, and aided by the Ministry of Fine Arts, Art Deco became

representative of France on the world stage – a crucial ingredient in the country’s colonizing mission. In 1935, French Minister Raymond Brugère stressed the importance of reinstating an imperial connection with Canada. He stated: “Since my arrival here, I have noticed the high level of moral importance that this project presents. Maybe more than anywhere else, it is important to Canada that France settles here, and in a building that bestows such honour upon us, while flattering the Canadians’ pride, who have conserved, so alive in them, the memory, and the taste of home.”¹⁰ Brugère’s statement alludes to France’s prior colonial conquests in Canada and the subsequent establishment of New France. As a result, the meticulous detail of the French Embassy’s interior rooms and exterior architecture demonstrates how the building developed into a vehicle of lingering imperialism in a post-colonial Canada.

Entrusted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French representatives in Ottawa were advised to find the best-suited architect for the French Embassy. French Minister Charles Arsène-Henry favoured the selection of an architect already familiar with the Canadian landscape. He stressed: “The individual chosen should understand, above all, the climate of the country, local customs, locally available materials, and the depths of skill and capacity that could be expected from contractors, foreman and tradesmen.”¹¹ After sifting through lists of well-established French-Americans, and local candidates including famed Montreal architect Ernest Cormier, it was decided a French national would be best suited for this particular project. Tasked with the responsibility of representing French nationalism on the international stage, architect Eugène Beaudouin was selected. Alongside his colleague Marcel Lods, his earlier projects experimented in mass-produced material, low-income housing, and social modernity.¹² Examples of his other work

include l'École de plein air, a progressive open air school in Suresnes (Figure 8), and the Maison du Peuple, a popular marketplace in Clichy (Figure 9). A young architect, Beaudouin and his innovative ideas were quickly becoming associated with leaders of the modern movement.

In comparison, the Embassy represents a remarkable departure from Beaudouin's work in France. Under patronage of the federal government, it highlights theatricality through its sumptuous use of material, including limestone, white-veined marbles, and prefabricated copper doors and window frames. Upon entering the Grand Hall, visitors are greeted by a wide, ceremonial staircase leading upstairs to smaller, more intimate spaces (Figure 10). Carefully selected art, furniture, and tapestries were imported by France's Mobilier National and the Quai d'Orsay to adorn the interior.¹³ The blending of modern aesthetics with imperialism is typified by the Embassy's Grand Salon, where visitors are confronted by two sets of monumental polished bronze doors decorated by elaborate door handles representing remembrance, faith, family, and labour (Figure 11). Upon entering the space, the empire-styled ballroom revolves entirely around the colossal tapestry, *Le Triomphe de Constantin* (Figure 12). Produced in the 17th century by the Gobelins factory, today the hanging tapestry is coupled with Art Deco wall sculptures made of stucco, allowing for a transition between the embroidered textiles and the rough, concrete walls (Figure 13).¹⁴ A victorious composition infused with Christian morality, *Le Triomphe de Constantin* also stresses a nostalgic appeal for imperial pleasures garnered through conquest. The tapestry helps to historicise the room, providing a modern framing of French imperialism in the Grand Salon - a telling reference to the era in which New France was initially established.

Architectural historians Isabelle Gournay and Jane C. Loeffler consider Embassy architecture a collaborative endeavour between two foreign countries. They explain: "[embassies may] evolve out of an ongoing reciprocal process, but they become fixtures that stand as symbols of national commitment and expectation."¹⁵ In other words, while custom-designed embassies have the added responsibility of promoting their own national interests, it is essential that they also express a mutual respect towards their host country. Regarding the French Embassy, this hybridity is accentuated by the Birch Room, or as it was once called the Smoking Room (Figure 14). A unique example of cross-cultural design, it is the only room in the Embassy made almost entirely of local materials and fashioned exclusively by the Montreal Institute of Applied Arts.¹⁶ This friendly foreign gesture is heightened by its interior design, evoking the appearance of a quintessential Canadian wilderness. Panels of unvarnished white birch bark are layered across the walls and ceiling to help diminish the smell of tobacco (whether this was effective or not, Beaudouin believed in the barks' absorbent qualities).¹⁷ Its creamy complexion is offset by red cedar pillars and hard wood floors. Sage green leather chairs contrast the warm colors, creating a comfortable interior.

While the Embassy is representative of France, it also provides insight into Canadian perseverance during the early part of the twentieth century. Exemplary of this autonomy is a reproduction of the Vimy Memorial on the second floor of the Embassy's gallery (Figure 15). A commemorative gesture towards Canadian sacrifice, the reproduction illustrates how the events of the First World War shaped Canada as a post-colony. No longer under the direct influence of the British government, a network of external policies was established during the 1920s and 1930s by Prime Minister Mackenzie King.¹⁸ Forging new international relationships

while severing Canada's imperial ties, the construction of a French delegation in Ottawa conveyed confidence in a rising Canadian autonomy.

Resembling a large manor residence, the exterior architecture uses cubist geometry to convey the rationality of volume and functionality – a sobering contrast to the interior rooms. Incorporating classical modern elements, it is a horizontal structure with vertical symmetry. Integrating French design with locally found materials, the exterior walls are constructed with hammer-dressed slabs of granite acquired from a once defunct quarry located nearby in Rivière-à-Pierre, Québec. The irregular blocks are accentuated by their large-scale bossing, stressing the Embassy's continuing durability.¹⁹ As well, the granite's resilience to harsh climates not only makes it a practical building material, but allowed Beaudouin to experiment with then-modern technology, such as thermal insulation.²⁰ Three storeys of rectangular windows adorn the front and sides of the exterior, while the front entrance is defined by a large baie vitrée. Enabling a sense of linear repetition, six soaring windows, flanked by two angular bow windows overlook the Ottawa River at the rear of the building. Lastly, the Embassy is protected by a hipped copper roof, purposely designed in a Canadian tradition (Figure 16).

Accompanying the palatial Rideau Hall, the French Embassy enhances an increasingly prestigious Sussex Drive. It is no surprise, therefore, that in 1943 the federal government acquired 24 Sussex Drive as the Prime Minister's official residence, instigating a need to unify the capital city and beautify its surrounding regions. The gradual removal of New Edinburgh's industrial activities during the 1940s by the federal crown (later renamed the National Capital Commission) facilitated the town's transformation into an affluent residential community. This move also established

Confederation Boulevard, generating a ceremonial route along Sussex Drive between Parliament Hill and the residences of the Prime Minister and Governor General – three crucial symbols of the Canadian government.²¹ After observing the success of the French Embassy and the diplomatic appeal of Confederation Boulevard, other nations have established their embassies in nearby quarters, creating what is now known as "Embassy Row" on Sussex Drive.

Ideally situated along the banks of the Ottawa River, the French Embassy is one of the city's most recognized institutions. Commissioned only a few years prior to the outbreak of World War II, the building communicates the value of French nationalism by means of Art Deco, while evoking admiration for a newly attained Canadian autonomy. In this paper, I have reconsidered how construction of the Embassy during the 1930s was affected by the globalization of modern travel and late imperial colonialism. Rendered a promotional tool for the French Ministry of Fine Arts, the Art Deco style supported the consumption and trade of commercial goods during an era of intensive rehabilitation. As a result, it upheld the French Embassy as a modern vehicle of change, and inherently married French nationalism with the sensation of world expositions and ocean liners. An analysis of the stylized Art Deco-inspired bronze sculpture of Jacques Cartier's ship *La Grande Hermine* helps make sense of these complicated events, joining them together in an unusual but historical narrative of national identity. Although situated today in the Grand Hall, the sculpture once graced Sussex Drive on the Embassy's front lawn for all to see. Despite its recent relocation indoors, its original setting reminded the public how essential nautical travel was to the founding of the French empire and the establishment of colonies across the globe. Anchored on foreign soil, the French Embassy repeatedly makes reference to this late imperial

connection, confirming once again that diplomatic relations can be influenced by politics of style.

¹ Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton, "The Style and the Age," in *Art Deco 1910-1939*, eds. Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton (Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 2003), 12.

² Tag Gronberg, "Paris 1925: Consuming Modernity," in *Art Deco 1910-1939*, eds. Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton (Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 2003), 158.

³ Bevis Hillier and Stephen Escritt, *Art Deco Style* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997), 118.

⁴ Nezar Al Sayyad, "Urbanism and the Dominance Equation: Reflections on Colonialism and National Identity," in *Forms of Dominance: On the Architecture and Urbanism of the Colonial Enterprise*, ed. Nezar Al Sayyad (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1992), 12.

⁵ Paul Atterbury, "Travel, Transport and Art Deco," in *Art Deco 1910-1939*, eds. Charlotte Benton and Tim Benton (Boston, New York, London: Bulfinch Press, 2003), 315.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁷ Hillier and Escritt, 118.

⁸ John Maxtone-Graham, *Normandie: France's Legendary Art Deco Ocean Liner*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007), 78-79.

⁹ Lee Server, *The Golden Age of Ocean Liners* (New York: Todtri Productions Limited, 1996), 35.

¹⁰ "The Architecture and History: Genesis of the Embassy 1928-1936: The Architectural Project," *The Embassy of France in Canada: Virtual Visit*, <http://www.ambafrance-ca.org>.

¹¹ Jean Fouace, *The French Embassy in Ottawa / L'Ambassade de France à Ottawa* (Paris: Éditions Internationales du Patrimoine), 2010, 30-35.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37-38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁴ "The Architecture and History: Details of the Embassy Rooms' decors: The Grand Salon," *The Embassy of France in Canada: Virtual Visit*, <http://www.ambafrance-ca.org>.

¹⁵ Isabelle Gournay and Jane C. Loeffler, "Washington and Ottawa: A Tale of Two Embassies," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 4 (December 2002): 480.

¹⁶ Fouace, 127.

¹⁷ Fouace, 128-129.

¹⁸ John Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs, Volume 1: The Early Years, 1909-1946* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990-1995), xii.

¹⁹ Fouace, 52.

²⁰ Fouace, 46.

²¹ Sally Coutts, *Draft Report: New Edinburgh Heritage Conservation District Study*, (Ottawa: Department of Urban Planning and Public Works, September 2000): 17-20, accessed April 22, 2013, http://www.newedinburgh.ca/images/stories/heritage_development/New%20Edinburgh%20Heritage%20Conservation%20District%20Study.pdf.

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Images

Figure 1: La Grande Hermine, Grand Hall, French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

<http://artdecobuildings.blogspot.ca/2009/12/entrance-hall-french-embassy-ottawa.html> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 2: Victoria Building, Ottawa. Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Victoria_Building,_Ottawa.JPG (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 3: French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

<https://is0.4sqi.net/userpix/YNVUHWRYTAUG3WED.jpg> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 4: Esplanade des Invalides, 1925 Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes, Paris. RIBA Library Photographs Collection. Source:

<http://www.architecture.com/LibraryDrawingsAndPhotographs/Exhibitionsandloans/ArtDecoTriumphant/Theexhibition/TheExhibition.aspx> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 5: 1931 Exposition Coloniale, Paris, Guide book cover. Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Expo_1931_Affiche2.jpg (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 6: SS Normandie, Poster by Adolphe Muron. Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Normandie_poster.jpg (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 7: First Class Salle à manger, SS Normandie. Source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SS_Normandie_Grande_Salle_%C3%A0_Manger.jpg (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 8: L'École de plein air, Suresnes. Source:

<http://www.interieurs.fr/blog/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Suresnes-3-petite.jpg> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 9 Maison du peuple, Clichy. Source:

http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fichier:Prouv%C3%A9_clichy_008.jpg (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 10. Grand Salon, French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

<http://www.ambafrance-ca.org/gallery/visite/entree/ot10.htm> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 11: Bronze doors, Gallery leading into Grand Salon, French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

<http://www.ambafrance-ca.org/gallery/visite/galerie/> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 12: Le Triomphe de Constantin, Grand Salon, French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grand_Salon_de_l%27ambassade_de_France_au_Canada.jpg (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 13: Le Triomphe de Constantin, Grand Salon, French Embassy, Ottawa, detail. Source:

<http://www.ambafrance-ca.org/gallery/visite/gdsalon/OT57.JPG> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 14: The Birch Room, French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fumoir de l%27ambassade de France au Canada.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fumoir_de_l%27ambassade_de_France_au_Canada.jpg) (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 15: Vimy Memorial, Gallery, French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

<http://www.ambafrance-ca.org/gallery/visite/galerie/ot15.htm> (accessed April 22, 2013).

Figure 16: French Embassy, Ottawa. Source:

[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:France, Ottawa.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:France,_Ottawa.jpg) (accessed April 22, 2013).