

Art Deco: Advertising Travel with Shapes and Colors

The height of the ocean liner began at the turn of the 20th century. During this time, ships were built with steam engines instead of sails, which made the journey faster and safer. Ocean liners provided the only means to travel around the world as passenger planes were still decades away. Every year, the liners became grander and grander in their design and the luxuries that were placed onboard.

To market the newest ships and the most exotic destinations, ocean liner companies created posters to advertise their unique travel opportunities. They became one of the premier outlets for artists to showcase their talents. The emphasis of the advertisements changed throughout the years, but mostly focused on the ships, the travels, and the onboard activities.

Some of the most brilliant designs were created in the 1920-30s when the Art Deco style was in full demand. Everything from buildings to graphics to even vacuums were using the elements of Art Deco in their design. You will learn more about the popular style and the places that ocean liners steaming towards by examining the collection of posters below!



Poster 1

Hamburg-America Line

Germany

Theodore Etbauer

1927

Let's examine our first poster! Representing the Hamburg-America Line that traveled from Germany to New York City, Theodore Etbauer was inspired by the growing Art Deco movement of the 1920s. He chose to brightly highlight the American flag behind two imposing ship funnels that sport the colors of Germany. It is no wonder that the artist decided to spotlight the funnels, as many travelers believed they signified power and speed. Ships would often have more than they needed, including the Titanic, which only had three working funnels with a fourth one added for purely aesthetic reasons.

What colors caught your eye first when looking at this poster?



Poster 2

Holland-America Line

Netherlands

A.M. Cassandre

1929

The funnels of the ship are also accentuated in our next poster. This piece of work was done for the Dutch Holland-America Line by A.M. Cassandre, a leader in the Art Deco movement. He made use of bold geometric shapes and bright colors, two major features of Art Deco designs, when deciding the layout of the ad. The yellow funnels are even more stressed in this poster with everything else having a white, gray, or black tint. In most of the ocean liner posters in this style, travelers are nowhere to be seen as the emphasis is on the luxuriousness of the vessel.

What geometric shapes do you see in this poster?



Poster 3

Canadian Pacific

Canada

J.R. Tooby

1931

In our next poster, we finally see the profile of a ship! J.R. Tooby created this design for Canadian Pacific that is marketing the company's route across the Atlantic Ocean. The large hull of the ship is highlighted in white, making it stand out against the blue of the sea and the sky, and is depicted as more slender than the actual Empress of Britain. Unlike later posters, the social activities onboard the ship and the destinations where they are headed are nonexistent in the Art Deco style of advertisements.

How does the size of the ship in the poster make you feel about boarding it for an excursion across the ocean?



Poster 4

General Transatlantic Company

France

A.M. Cassandre

1935

The Art Deco movement was in full swing when this French ocean liner poster, one of the most popular and celebrated ads of the 1930s, was created by A.M. Cassandre. Unlike the previous examples, this design is almost entirely symmetrical, meaning that both sides mirror each other, which was another one of the main styles of the Art Deco movement. Much like the last poster, it also emphasizes the enormity of the ship by choosing to depict it from sea level and showcasing the imposing hull as the majority of the frame.

What other elements in this poster give the ship a sense of real enormity?



Poster 5

United States Lines

United States of America

E. Borlos

1947

The United States Lines was one of the first to operate after the conclusion of World War II. Artist, E. Borlos, knew that patriotism was high among the public and decided to use the American flag in his work. It certainly draws comparisons to the last poster with the birds flying in front of the hull and tiny waves crashing below it. The Art Deco movement would persist in some ways until the 1950s, but ocean liner posters would start to depict the exotic port-of-calls (stops) and engaging entertainment instead of the magnificence of the ships.

What piece is highlighted the most in this poster?

Now, it is time to make your own Art Deco ocean liner poster! Remember that styles that were talked about in the examples above of the Art Deco movement. Decide where your ship is going to be headed and what the name of the company will be!

