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# The New York Times

## Celebrating a Little-Known Influence on Art Deco

By JANE GOLDBERG

**A** LOT of people know that Picasso and Modigliani collected African masks, which inspired their paintings during the 1930's. Fewer realize there was also a significant influence on architecture and design by African-Americans during the Art Deco era, the 1920's and 30's.

But it was there, in the United States and abroad. And the Miami Design Preservation League, a nonprofit group that promotes and preserves the historic Art Deco district, hopes to enlighten audiences in Miami Beach at the 19th Art Deco Weekend festival, which is celebrating African-American contributions.

"The answers to the tough questions of race relations regarding architecture aren't written in the history books yet," said Dr. Richard K. Dozier, a professor of architecture at Florida A & M University, one of several scholars scheduled to speak over the weekend. "It's amazing, the number of African-American architects during that era," he added. "Some 62 in 1920. It's important to look at their accomplishments and their tenacity to survive."

Dr. Dozier points to the details in the design of St. John Baptist Church, built around 1940, on Northwest Third Avenue in downtown Miami, from its incised columns to its stepped facade.

"It may not rank as a 9 compared with other Art Deco buildings in Miami, but it was an important symbol in a poor African-American community and reflected the values that a community placed on a church created by a black architect," he said.

The firm of McKissack & McKissack, based in Nashville, created that church and 2,000 others throughout the United States. Its founders, Moses and Calvin McKissack,

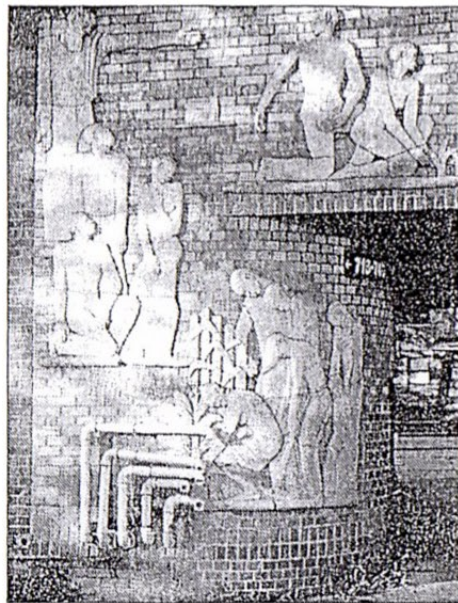
learned building skills from their father, who was a slave.

Other black architects of the Deco era who had their own regional practices include Hilliard Robinson, whose modern approach to public housing Dr. Dozier said was "exceptionally expressed" in the Langston Terrace Homes in the Northeast section of Washington, named for John Mercer Langston, Virginia's first black Congressman. The complex boasts a thoughtful arrangement of duplex and multiple family units around a large open space. Sculptural reliefs at the entrance depict slaves coming to the New World. "Using the vocabulary of Art Deco, he spoke to African people," Dr. Dozier said, pointing out that Mr. Robinson helped to train African-American architects as chairman of the department of architecture at Howard University.

Another speaker in Miami Beach, Margaret Vendryes, a Ph.D. candidate in art history at Princeton University, points to African influence in the strong geometries and bold colors of Art Deco designs seen all over the world.

There was a healthy exchange of students, artists and culture starting in the 1920's between Dakar, in French West Africa, and Paris, Ms. Vendryes said in a telephone interview. Selected items survive today as examples of Art Deco style with little or no acknowledgment of their original sources, she added.

One example of this cultural appropriation, she said, is a famous standing lamp designed around 1923 by Eileen Gray. "This lamp has large wooden snakes as one of its motifs, and it was designed for a bedroom," she said. "I think it's rather ironic when you realize the design was originally brought out of a particular village for initiation rites. Some designers used Yoruba tribal thrones as footstools in the living rooms of the wealthy clients at the time."



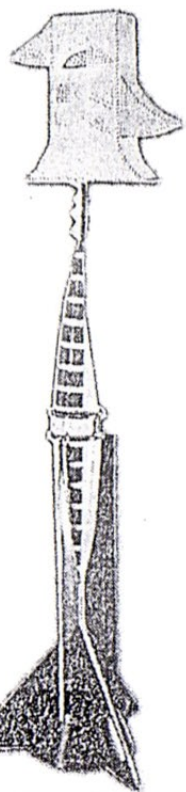
Photographs by Florida A & M University

St. John Baptist Church in Miami, above, and Langston Terrace Homes in Washington, left, with sculptural reliefs of black history.

Ms. Vendryes said there was a tendency to "write Art Deco design secondhand." She explained that designers began running out of ideas after Art Nouveau and were looking back for something simpler. "Unindustrialized people had no financial woes or electrical appliances that broke down," she said. Above all, "the war-worn societies on both continents

wanted to be carefree," she continued, adding, "There was something decidedly daring about having the creations of a primitive artist displayed in one's private space."

Further information on the Art Deco Weekend may be obtained by calling the Miami Design Preservation League at (305) 672-2014.



Little, Brown

Eileen Gray's Deco lamp; primal influences.