

**TOILETS AND REFRESHMENTS:** Available at the National Film and Sound Archive, open 7 days a week.

**PARKING:** Multi-storey pay parking is available in Allsop Street off Childers Street and at the National Film and Sound Archive. At weekends, parking on the ANU campus in the area of the Drill Hall is possible.

**LEVEL:** Easy, also suitable for bicycles or wheelchairs. Bicycles can be locked at several convenient spots on the ANU campus.

**WALKING AND VIEWING TIME:** 1 to 2 hours.

**DISTANCE:** 2 km.

**START AND FINISH:** The ANU Drill Hall Gallery, Junction of Kingsley and Hutton Streets, The Australian National University (ANU) campus, Acton.

The Canberra School of Art Photo courtesy of ANU Heritage Office



## ART DECO IN ACTON A SELF-GUIDED WALKING TOUR

### WHAT IS ART DECO?



The term comes from a French exhibition in 1925 of 'Arts Decoratifs' but did not enter general use till the 1960s to describe a range of Inter-War styles.



Art Deco covers a number of changes in style, aesthetics and technology that influenced every visual medium in the 1920s and 1930s.



As a term, it captures the spirit of an age when people wanted to put the tragedies and hardships of World War I behind them and embrace a glamorous, adventurous and elegant future.



The style was characterised by a marriage between form and function; by symmetry and balance; by simple clean lines in buildings, transport, household items and industrial design; and by distinctive decorative embellishments.



Art Deco celebrated the benefits of the Machine Age: industrialisation, mass production, new technologies, quality materials and vibrant colours. It was an era of sky scrapers, ocean liners, railways, motor cars—speed and travel. It was also an era of electricity, bright lights, film, radio and mass entertainment. It marked the beginnings of consumerism.



This was a time of intellectual and aesthetic tension between Tradition and Modernism, between people nostalgic for the visual symbols of a pre-industrial past and those who favoured the clean but stark lines and new technologies that characterised Modernism. In many ways, Art Deco emerged as an inclusive style that embraced new materials, such as reinforced concrete and metal windows, but softened these by incorporating decorative features from the past.

Form meets function: decorative air vents



**PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR:** Dr Sally Brockwell, The Australian National University

**TEXT & PHOTOS:** Penny Taylor

**MAPS & LAYOUT:** Multimedia Services, ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University

<http://www.actionwalkways.com>

<http://www.artdeco.org.au>

<http://www.nationaltrustact.org.au>

[http://www.environment.act.gov.au/heritage/canberra\\_tracks](http://www.environment.act.gov.au/heritage/canberra_tracks)

**DECO:**  
**SEE THE FOLLOWING WEBSITES FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CANBERRA WALKS AND ART**

No 2. Art Deco in Acton: a self-guided walking tour: North.

No 1. Art Deco in a Canberra Context: a walk in the Inner North.

**DECO SELF-GUIDED TOURS OF CANBERRA BEING PREPARED FOR THE 2013 CENTENARY.**

**THIS PAMPHLET IS ONE OF A SERIES OF ART DECO**

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### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### ART DECO IN ACTON

This walk introduces you to three heritage listed buildings in Canberra that represent the Art Deco period and some of the social, intellectual and aesthetic ideas that informed it.

In 1908, it was decided to build a national capital here on the Limestone Plains. The design competition was won by Walter Burley Griffin in 1911, and Canberra was named in 1913. From the 1920s, construction of the new city, its major institutions and accommodation for public servants gathered momentum. The high period of Art Deco internationally fell between the 1920s and 1940s. In Canberra, many competing influences contributed to what is known as the 'Federal Capital Style'. However, a number of architects have left us fine examples of Art Deco, in part or in whole. This is particularly evident in public buildings.

Canberra was intended as a national and international centre of science, education, collections and research, largely focussed on the Acton area. The CSIRO Entomology Building on Clunies Ross Street (with some Art Deco features) was built in 1930 as part of this commitment to scientific research. Comparative anatomy was also a crucial discipline in the early 20th century for both medical research and training. Sir Colin McKenzie (1877-1938) played a major role in the establishment of the Australian Institute of Anatomy (AIA), now the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA). A doctor, anatomist and zoologist, he offered his large zoological and anatomical collection to the nation. In 1926, an extensive ethnological collection was also gifted to the nation, to be housed in the same building.

The walk begins with the youngest building, the Drill Hall, designed by E.H. Henderson and constructed in 1939 after the Depression, just before the outbreak of World War II. For economic and functional reasons, it is characterised by restraint rather than decorative extravagance, but some key design elements from the earlier Art Deco period remain. These provide a good introduction to the style. Building 2, the School of Art, was constructed as the Canberra High School in 1939. Designed by Cuthbert Whitley, it is a wonderful example of Art Deco architecture.

The walk ends with the oldest building, the NFSA, formerly the AIA. Designed by W.H. Morris and completed in 1930 it allows us to experience an exuberance of decorative elements as the climax of our walk.

- horizontal banding around the brickwork.
  - a horizontal geometric frieze, based on a hexagon;
  - curvilinear or 'streamlined' brickwork on the lower level and a small step-back that adds a vertical line;
  - elongated metal sash windows in groups of three;
  - decorative but functional air vents beneath the parapet;
  - decorative but functional air vents beneath the verticality;
  - recessed setback (or stepping) that emphasises verticality;
  - a decorative rain head, also with horizontal banding;
  - horizontal banding in line with 'the rule of three';
  - parapet walls with metal capping;
  - typical Art Deco clock face;
- This image illustrates a number of key Art Deco features (from the list inside) to help you identify them as you walk. Read them from the top of the photo down:



### TYPICAL ART DECO FEATURES SOME EXAMPLES

#### KEY ART DECO FEATURES

Test yourself. As you walk, how many examples can you find from the list below?

- examples of symmetry and balance in design;
- examples of both vertical and horizontal elements;
- the use of stepped (also known as ziggurat) forms, both externally and internally;
- curved or 'streamlined' brickwork, and 'eyebrows';
- new industrial techniques and building materials;
- decorative motifs symbolic of a building's function;
- nationalistic Australian Art Deco motifs;
- exotic motifs from past cultures such as Ancient Egypt;
- the principle that decorative elements should be grouped in threes: 'the rule of three';
- geometric patterning characteristic of Art Deco, including chevrons, octagons and hexagons. Look at architecture, floor coverings such as marble and parquet, decorations;
- curvilinear motifs, such as sunbursts;
- capitals, roundels, recessed spandrels and decorative bronze lights and skylights in Art Deco style;
- functional features used to enhance design. Look at lighting, down pipes, air vents and security grilles;
- examples of features that emphasise Stripped Classicism or Modernism;
- flagpoles or finials, and porthole windows;
- landscaping and plantings that enhance the design.



Decorative lighting features



### 1) THE DRILL HALL GALLERY

Built as a drill hall for military support purposes in 1939, the building was acquired by The Australian National University in 1969 and modified for use as an art gallery in the 1980s.

Its heritage listing describes it as a 'simple but robust Inter-War Functionalist architectural style' with 'some Art Deco detailing in its brickwork'. Other features also show Art Deco influences. These include the symmetry and balance that characterise the building, as well as the pleasing integration of horizontal and vertical features. The southern façade, to the left, exemplifies this and the parapet wall, elongated metal windows with horizontal glazing bars, rain heads, down pipes and air vents all contribute to the effect. The recessed entrance between curved walls and the curved bricks on the pillars framing the windows are also characteristic of Art Deco 'streamlining'. Inside, the banded brickwork is of interest.

### 2) THE SCHOOL OF ART

In line with aspirational principles of the day, the Canberra High School was designed in 1939 as the most modern high school in Australia: light, spacious, healthy and uplifting. As you walk up Childers Street, the dramatic central clock tower soars above the two storey rendered brick building in a vision of symmetry, simplicity and balance. The parapet walls, metal windows, clock face, geometric decorative elements and functional features all contribute to an integrated design. The long symmetrical wings of the front façade become sweeping curves as they join the side wings—part of the original design but added in the 1950s. Further prize winning additions filled in the three wings in the 1980s. The building's heritage listing describes it as 'one of the best examples of Art Deco style in Canberra'. The grassed area in front of the symmetrical driveway is a good spot for identifying many of the Art Deco aspects of this design before heading left along the front.

Note how the central tower steps down to the two storey wings and then to the wide central portico with fluted pillars and curved walls. The doorway, widening concrete steps, and period lights set on piers add to the flowing symmetry.

Vertical lines are emphasized by the double hung recessed metal windows that vary in length and width to highlight and frame the central tower. As at the Drill Hall, the glazing bars give horizontal balance but here the decorative horizontal banding along the parapet and above the upper windows is far more pronounced. Note the functional, but decorative, rain heads set into the original banding, except where they have been renewed. Horizontal lines are also visible where the rendered walls meet the 'Canberra Red' brick base with its recessed shadow line.

The 'rule of three', a key element of Art Deco design, is considered a symmetrical ideal. Horizontal banding is often found in lines of three. The windows, too, form multiples of three. Cuthbert Whitley, the architect, has used six as a coordinating number throughout the building, underscoring this with extensive use of the hexagon as a geometric decorative principle. The double hexagonal motifs vertically aligned down the clock tower and horizontally aligned round the portico present the most striking example of this. Look too at the balanced positioning of the air vents

and their design, with a hexagonal centre, different from those at the Drill Hall.

A stylized, Art Deco 'torch of learning' motif appears above the door. Another motif is repeated in the spandrels (the spaces between each top and bottom window). As you walk left and round one of the streamlined 'waterfall' ends of the façade, note the strong vertical fluting at the junction, more stepping on the parapet wall, and further decorative metal features including a wrought steel circle and delicate, curved handrail.

The building contains examples of the latest industrial technologies. Reinforced concrete and metal were used to ensure a fire resistant building. The ground floor was raised to allow for subfloor ventilation through terracotta air vents; boilers provided heating in winter. The metal entrance doors and door furniture are original. The door step and internal wet areas are made of terrazzo (a new durable material made of polished cement and stone chips) that was a hallmark of the era.

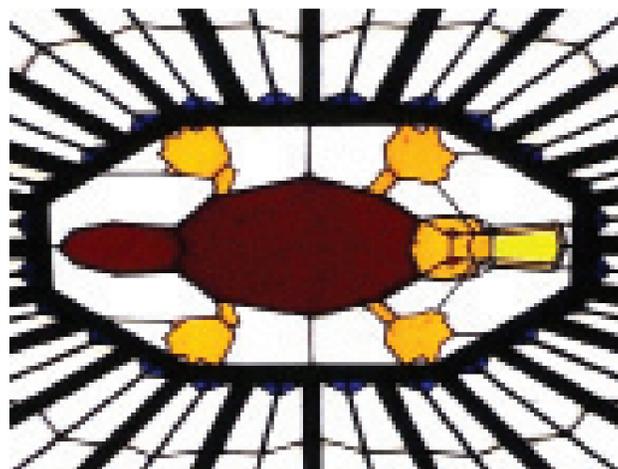
Continue through the School of Art car park, across Ellery Crescent, and take the small path to the left of the original Institute of

Anatomy Director's Residence. This example of domestic architecture contains significant stepping around the lower bay window and chevron air vents, both features that are widespread in the old Australian Institute of Anatomy (AIA).

Continue past the Director's Residence to arrive at the northern side of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA).

### 3) THE NATIONAL FILM AND SOUND ARCHIVE

Designed by W. H. Morris in 1929 and completed in 1930, this Stripped Classical building has extensive Art Deco features clearly visible in its structure, fittings and decorative elements. The U-shaped building surrounds a courtyard, enclosed by a contemporary new wing in 1998. The decorative elements reflect the zoological collections the AIA was initially designed to house, as well as making extensive use of geometric forms and classical motifs. As you explore the exterior and interior of this building, look at the way the repetition and linking of particular motifs and decorative themes gives visual and conceptual coherence and a degree of uniformity.



### THE NORTHERN FACADE

This side provides an opportunity to examine new technologies and sophisticated industrial design as well as a marriage between form and function. Parapet walls hide a flat roof clad in asphalt. The internal structure comprises massive columns of reinforced concrete and steel girders as well as innovative breeze blocks and Canberra bricks. The exterior is faced with Gosford sandstone. Internal drainage runs between the bricks and facing, later supplemented by attractive copper rain heads and down pipes—some stolen in 2011! The metal windows, in groupings of three, are double glazed and glass blocks at the base provide additional refracted light.

Note the octagonal air vents that are integral to the whole design. Large fans in the basement drew air in through the vents and circulated it around the interior.

### THE FRONT OF THE BUILDING

Symmetry is evident in the building and landscaping. The lines are balanced, clean and elegant, with vertical and horizontal harmony. One common decorative motif draws on classical themes, such as columns with roundels or decorated capitals. Decorative elements, inside and out, show consistent use

of geometrical forms: the octagon and the hexagon as well as the chevron and half-hexagon, or trapezoid. Before entering, look for examples of these and other Art Deco design elements. These include:

- the flagpoles and lights;
- the lettering, a unique Art Deco font with low waisted F and E—see also the Exit signs inside the building;
- the portico with three entrances framed by columns;
- nationalistic motifs—native flora and fauna;
- motifs representing the building's function as a zoological collection—goannas, with waratahs and ferns, on the columns and frilled lizards round the door; the stylized column and roundel features on the walls;
- the brilliant Art Deco palette of the recessed spandrels set above and below the lower windows: the design draws on the functional hexagonal, chevron, and trapezoid air vents that they incorporate;
- the grilles, their geometric form again incorporating hexagons and chevrons;
- the large wooden outer doors that incorporate both octagons and hexagons and the arrowhead handles on the inner doors that reinforce the chevron motif.

### THE INTERIOR OF THE BUILDING

The interior of the NFSA brings this Art Deco tour to a worthy climax. As you enter, we hope that you will enjoy the wealth of Art Deco features that Morris and his team employed to make this one of the most pleasing buildings in Canberra.

To assist you, the building has been divided into three main areas, each with a list of key features that you can check off as you walk around. As you walk, don't forget to LOOK UP and LOOK DOWN!

### THE FOYER AND CORRIDOR TO THE RIGHT

The foyer is rich with Art Deco features including:

- the perspex skylight with its iconic yellow platypus in stylized octagonal form. How many octagons can you find in this one feature? The lines radiate out to the deep blue edge of the largest octagon like rays of the sun. Look for other platypus throughout the building;
- the floor made of local Acton marble mined nearby (now under the lake). Note the geometric shapes, similar to the spandrel decoration on the exterior;
- columns and roundels in black marble that frame both doors into the foyer, repeating the classical motif;
- the 'ziggurat' (or stepped pyramidal) feature above the entrance doors;
- the clock face in Art Deco style and colours;
- the radiators, functionally recessed and ornately decorated with AIA (Australian Institute of Anatomy);
- chevrons, a common Art Deco motif, appear in the leadlight window behind the reception desk, in the cornices, along the top of the wall tiling, in the balcony and railings, and in the air vents in the corridors.

Go down the left side corridor and then turn right.

### THE MAIN GALLERY

Two galleries originally housed the zoological and anatomical collections, set out in glass topped exhibition cabinets and cupboards. The one to the right of the foyer is now a film viewing room and often in darkness. The left hand gallery allows you to better enjoy the decorative features. Look for:

- bronze native zoological motifs that seem to stand on columns, reflecting those in the portico and courtyard;
- stepping that links the motifs to the ceiling;
- Art Deco ceiling lamps, in octagonal, geometric form;
- air vents above the lamps, a combination of hexagons, trapezoids and chevrons;
- decorative elements on the balcony and upper walls;
- air vents and wooden doors with chevrons.

### THE COURTYARD AND ARCADES

The elegant courtyard, originally closed in on only three sides (the northern extension was added in 1998) draws on a Mediterranean and Garden Pavilion style found elsewhere in Canberra buildings from the period. Decorative elements flow through from the interior. Look for:

- examples of 'the rule of three' in the horizontal banding that follows the slightly stepped roof line, and in the grouping of the metal windows and air vents;
- more columns and roundels as decorative features;
- more chevrons in the trim along the top of the arcades and in the wooden doors into the galleries;
- more arrowhead door handles;
- zoological motifs, including the koala, a focus of McKenzie's research, and another platypus, near the pond and the plaque to McKenzie.