

CUNARD

CUNARD LINE

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—STEPHEN LASH



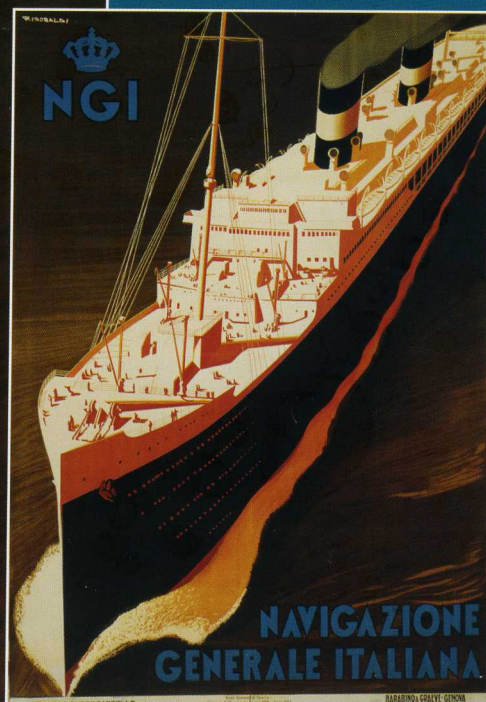
Cunard Line. *Europe–America*, 1929, Kenneth D. Shoesmith, published by Thos. Foreman & Son, England.

Visualizing a golden age

Art Deco embodies the glamour of ocean liner travel

In the 1920s and '30s, the Art Deco movement celebrated the rise of commerce, technology, and speed, as well as the wealth and luxury of America's Jazz Age. Nowhere did Art Deco find a more appropriate symbol than in the great ocean liners—*Queen Elizabeth*, *Normandie*, *Ile de France*—that epitomized the allure of transatlantic travel.

"PEM possesses what may be the largest collection of ocean liner art in the world," says curator of maritime art and history Dan Finamore. The museum has been collecting steamship and ocean liner art since the advent of steam technology. Throughout the twentieth century, major gifts from several dedicated collectors have left PEM with a comprehensive statement about shipboard life.



ABOVE AND LEFT (DETAIL): *Navigazione Generale Italiana*, ca. 1925, Rigobaldi, published by Barabino & Graeve, Italy.



Messageries Maritimes, ca. 1928, Bernard Lachevre, France.

Most recently, Stephen Lash, chairman of Christie's North and South America and a PEM overseer, has contributed greatly to the museum's collection of ocean liner art, especially advertising posters that were designed to sell passage on these great ships. "The posters are graphically compelling, full of nostalgia, and have a strong aesthetic appeal," he says.

In a *London Review of Books* article about a 2003 Art Deco exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Peter Campbell writes, "The commerce in pleasure which the Art Deco style promoted promised to gild your good times... whether on a streamlined train, an ocean liner, or in a glitzy nightclub." Companies like Cunard, the French Line, and Holland-America enlisted renowned graphic designers to capture the luxury and elegance of these floating cities in promotional posters that have become highly sought after museum pieces.

Artists such as Cassandre and Rigobaldi used dramatic perspective to convey the overwhelming size of the ships. Aerodynamic imagery reflected the importance of

technology. Skyscrapers and other contemporary icons added a sense of scale and modernity. Vibrant colors and sleek forms spoke of shipboard opulence and exotic ports of call.

"Art Deco was a serious break from art that emphasized natural forms," says curator Finamore, "and companies used Art Deco motifs to make ocean liners look progressive and high-tech." A 1929 serigraph by Kenneth Shoesmith (opposite) depicts Cunard Line's *Aquitania* departing between two towering skyscrapers, trailing smoke from its four distinctive funnels. The skyscrapers suggested New York, fast becoming the world's most fashionable city, and also reminded potential passengers that the ships, too, were marvels of modern engineering.

France's *Messageries Maritimes* line promoted the exoticism of its foreign ports of call in the lyrical image by Bernard Lachevre (left), given to the museum by Lash. Passengers are invited to "visit the Far East," including the company's second home port in Saigon. "The ambience aboard the ship would have felt otherworldly and hypermodern" to travelers who had not yet incorporated Art Deco's radical forms into their homes, says Finamore. And the approaching Vietnamese junks with their glowing lanterns further highlight the contrast of cultures, "but in a safe and elegant way. One can imagine the people on deck dressed in black tie." Fireworks launched from distant barges are "all a part of the sound-and-light show you would experience on board."

World War II brought an end to the Art Deco era and the icons it celebrated. Jet travel ushered in an age when the journey was no longer the destination, and once-exotic locales became accessible to more and more travelers. The era of posters as a lure for travelers has passed; those being produced today are rarely as striking as the iconic images of the Art Deco era. "There are distinctive styles and excellent posters from the 1960s," Finamore says, "but the patina of time has not yet enveloped them. These older images are evocative of an entire environment. The '60s doesn't yet have the romantic aura that the 1920s does, but it will."

In January 2004, the maiden voyage of Cunard's *Queen Mary 2* signaled what enthusiasts hope will be the return of luxurious ocean liner travel. Lash attended the naming ceremony for what is now the world's largest, longest, tallest, grandest ocean liner and spent a night in one of the *QM2*'s terraced staterooms. "It was remarkable," he says. "It was evocative of an era that we thought had passed." ■