

Optimisme Bienvenu

By [Emily Resmer](#)

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I admit it: I'm a snob. I can hear the slightly superior voice in my head: "One really should see works in their true context to fully understand them. One really should travel." (Funny how that voice always begins sentences with the word "One.") Traveling exhibits of precious objects and art always remind me of the hapless polar bear who found himself in the hot, humid Jackson Zoo: As a child, I was fascinated and drawn to him out of his sheer improbability, yet also miserable on his behalf.

Of course snobbery is born out of ignorance, and I feel ever so ignorant, humble and repentant after glimpsing the Paris Moderne exhibit at the Mississippi Museum of Art, made possible by the Robert M. Hearin Foundation.

Curator Dominique Gagneux of the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris was at the museum to oversee the installation of the show containing more than 40 pieces of fine art, 25 pieces of furniture, 10 sculptures and other decorative pieces from the Art Deco period in Paris between World Wars I and II. "The idea of placing paintings in relation to the furniture is exciting," Gagneux said just days before the exhibit opened here. The pieces are segregated by type in the museum in Paris, not mixed together as they are here.

Fellow Frenchman Olivier Gabet, also here to install the exhibit, added: "In America you are so much more open to this idea of the different types of pieces together." Many of the works have been tucked away in storage at the Musee d'Art Moderne and this is the first time any of the pieces in the exhibit have left France.

Works in the show evoke themes of the era such as exoticism, modernism and the high life of Paris in the '30s. The show is organized into five rooms, each with different characteristics. For instance, one room has many painted images of beautiful women as well as a human-sized gilded bronze statue of the goddess Diana. Also in the room is furniture suitable for the boudoir of a wealthy Parisian woman.

The next room transitions into the theme of exoticism and Colonialism with furniture made of python skin and and the "epitome of design," as Gagneux described it, demonstrated in the Nile Crocodile "Secretaire Egyptien" by Ruhlmann. Gagneux lovingly opened the delicately scaled piece to reveal a supple Moroccan Leather interior with perfectly detailed compartments.

Other desks like this could have been commissioned from the artist with different woods or skins depending on the taste of the patron.

In this period of history, the city of Paris itself was a huge patron of the arts in an attempt to maintain "forced optimism," Gagneux said. Just as the USA had the WPA during the Depression to create jobs that resulted in our present highway system, the city of Paris commissioned countless expensive, exquisite works of art as a testimony to the mastery of Parisian artists as well as an attempt to do anything to avoid the horror of another World War through sheer will. America's subsidy of roads as opposed to France's subsidy of art opens up many great questions—thesis topic, anyone?

Not only was France sandwiched between two wars, but along with Britain it was a lonely democracy in Europe amid dictatorships of many flavors: Nazism under Hitler in Germany, Fascism under Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain. Communism blossomed in Russia during this period. The World's Fair of 1937 in Paris was the crowning example of "forced optimism," hoping to celebrate the wonder of modernity, Man and his genius, world cooperation. This Neo-classic theme is evident in a huge panel commissioned for the ship "Normandy." Several perfectly proportioned Greek athletes competing in Olympic events are diagonally embossed on the monumental panel that greets viewers at the base of the stairs to the exhibit.

My favorite celebration of modernity is the reproduction by the artist himself of Raoul Dufy's "La Fee Electricite," for the Hall of Light at the World's Fair. The original was a stunning 10 x 60 meters, while the reproduction is a still impressive 1 x 6 meters. The canvas traces the history of electricity from the beginning of time (on the right side of the canvas, perhaps like the sun rising in the East?) while various Greek scientists ponder light and other wonders of our world. As the painting moves West, the colors shift through the spectrum; thinkers, inventors and scientists become more modern, while Greek gods including Electra herself (the Electricity Fairy) peer down from the center examining the progress of time, also perhaps recognizing the inevitability of World War II. Dufy studied texts and books to specifically reproduce scientific instruments correctly—his brush strokes are effortless and perfect, like jottings telling the story and foreshadowing many of his later fauvist works.

The exhibit itself is an elegant Parisian gem, and we are so lucky to have it here. (Think Audrey Hepburn in a Chanel suit—petite, perfect and enigmatic). I realize now that even "in context" in Paris, this exhibit would not have been possible the way we see it here. How lucky we are that we live in a time of international artistic cooperation and optimism, allowing exhibits like this one to create their own context by virtue of the borders they cross and the time and place they inhabit.

But I still feel sorry for that polar bear.

Paris Moderne features works by Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Gerard Saddier and others from March 6-July 11, 2004 at the Mississippi Museum of Art.

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