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Moderne miracle

A trip back to early 20th century Paris is as close as a drive up the interstate, as some of the finest examples of art deco design and master paintings from such artists as Matisse and Picasso have made their way from Paris to Jackson, Miss.

Wednesday, May 12, 2004

ART

When Dominique Gagneux, a curator from the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, was in Jackson, Miss., recently to open an exhibition of Parisian Art Deco, she found herself swept up in the entourage of the German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, who was in town to inaugurate a show across the street on Baroque Dresden.

The irony was not lost on Gagneux. "The FBI, the CIA, all these policemen were there, and the street was closed," said Gagneux, whose exhibition opened March 6 at the Mississippi Museum of Art.

"A lady handed us a German flag, and Schroeder came up to us, shook our hands and we ended up in his group, attending the press conference with speeches by the chancellor, the governor and local officials. It was very funny to come from France to Jackson, Miss., to see the German chancellor!"

Funny, but perhaps not entirely unexpected in a town that has created a niche for itself over the last decade by importing dazzling blockbuster art exhibitions from museums and palaces in St. Petersburg, Versailles, Madrid and now Dresden. Those exhibitions, exclusive to Jackson, cost millions to mount, and their extravagant jaw-dropping splendors are designed to generate the kind of marquee wattage that attracts busloads from across the nation.

But this year the city has become a crossroads of two very different kinds of European culture. For while "The Glory of Baroque Dresden" is extravagant in scope, with its glittering galleries of royal riches, "Paris Moderne: Art Deco Works from the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris" is sharp, stylish and streamlined. It's the kind of scholarly show you might expect to find in a much larger city.

The first such selection from the Musee d'Art Moderne ever to leave France, "Paris Moderne," which runs through July 11, is as exquisitely focused as it is elegantly articulated, bringing together in five galleries furniture, decorative objects and paintings that evoke affluent Paris between the two world wars. Roaming the exhibit's lavishly stylized interiors is like walking into the pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald or sailing on the Normandie.

You enter the exhibition beneath *Les Sports* (1935), a monumental, gold-lacquered depiction of ancient Olympians in low relief. Measuring 18-by-18 feet, with 45 panels weighing 70 pounds each, it was created by Jean Dunand for the smoking room in the first-class section of the S.S. Normandie, the pride of the French Line.

To enter the galleries is to feel like you're in the finest parlors of Paris, amid room re-creations elegantly appointed by Arbus, Champion and Dufet, surrounded by the paintings of Dufy, Matisse, Picasso and Modigliani.

All this comes just a year after one area liquor store made national headlines by giving away its stock of French wine to protest President Jacques Chirac's position against the war in Iraq.

But Gagneux said she had encountered only the most enthusiastic and welcoming responses.

"I didn't have the feeling that political things would interfere with our exhibition," she said, adding that Mississippi museum volunteers were eager to practice their French and talk about their travels to Paris with her and her co-curator, Olivier Gabet. "It was just a moment, and it doesn't change the historical relationship between the two countries. It's like if you have a quarrel with someone. It's superficial, I think.

"People are kind down South. They say hello in the streets. When you come from Paris you are astonished, so you don't respond the first time."

Betsy Bradley, director of the Mississippi Museum of Art, said she would like viewers to come away impressed with "the optimism, elegance and quality of design that was so important to that time and realizing its influence on our own culture since then. This was right there at the end of a time when we thought there were no limits on wealth and privilege and the ability to master technology. The biggest oceanliner. The most expensive techniques and materials. But it's not overwrought. It's refined."

The elegance of "Paris Moderne" provides a striking contrast with the museum's spring 2002 exhibition, "Passionate Observer: Eudora Welty among Artists of the Thirties," which examined the same years through a more somber lens.

That exhibition of Depression-era art, including photographs by the late writer and lifetime Jacksonian (who incidentally was awarded the French Legion of Honor in 1996), showed the human side of the 1930s as experienced in the rural South.

"This exhibition looks at those years from the other end of the spectrum," said Rene Paul Barilleaux, the deputy director for programs at the museum who co-designed the Art Deco installation with Gagneux, his Parisian counterpart. He said that the Mississippi museum "looked to bookend the period with these two extremely different points of view."

Many of the works in "Paris Moderne" were commissioned by the French government to aid artists and craftsmen suffering from a lack of patronage during the Depression, just as the Works Progress Administration supported U.S. artists during that time. Welty herself traveled around rural Mississippi as a publicity agent for the WPA.

The curators in Paris also remarked on the Mississippi museum's detail-oriented approach to the exhibition. "We were perfectly on the same wavelength for the hangings and for the feeling about the works," Gagneux said.

This rapport may have been nurtured by the fact that Barilleaux has a French family background. Their common approach included an attempt to level the playing field between fine art and design. "People often see painting and sculpture as more important, but we strove for equity," he said. "We wanted to achieve a balance, so that the craftsmanship of the furniture is an equal counterpoint to the paintings and sculptures. We hope that viewers will gain an equal appreciation of all works. It's not as if one is better than the other."

That said, some of the more important artworks are exhibited alone, not juxtaposed in arrangements of fine art and furniture, Barilleaux said. He added that other examples, especially portraits, were incorporated into the interior re-creations to "animate the rooms and bring those little touches that give us a sense of the people who would have lived there."

"In the U.S. there is an interest in period rooms," Gagneux said, "and it is interesting to put together paintings and furniture as they would have been seen in Paris interiors, in a maison, say, in the Ile-de-France."

Gagneux said the exhibition was organized around the theme of three international exhibitions held in

Paris -- the Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in 1925, the Colonial Exhibition in 1931 and Des Arts et Des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in 1937. It was a culturally combustible period when the geometric lines of modern industry appeared in cabinet inlays while a classical renaissance reimagined old forms in exotic and unusual materials and styles, and when the Roaring Twenties' taste for extravagance squared off against those democratic idealists who sought to synthesize artistic styles for mass production.

Still, it's all about luxury. Upholstered in brilliant white, Arbus's neoclassical music room, with its angular armchairs, dramatically sloping chaise lounge and a table inset with precious shell, is clustered beneath the portrait of an elegant young Parisian woman, luxuriously clad in Chanel and sensually reclined on a couch that echoes the Arbus piece. It is a breathtakingly graceful harmony of superb craftsmanship, geometry and material that suggests the most affluent nights in white satin.

In masculine counterpoint, the adjacent room uses primitivism and exoticism to show the influence of the 1931 Colonial Exhibition on design. There are the paintings of wild predators -- the Georges-Lucien Guyot and Paul Jouve lions, panthers and an eagle, along with Jacques Emile Ruhlmann's secretary, with its crocodile skin veneer, and a lacquered, silver-leaf folding screen ornamented with icebergs and polar bears. Traditional ideals of proportion and elegance were synthesized with unexpected materials such as metal, palm wood and python skin to find the space "between tradition and modernism," Gagneux said.

The exhibition culminates in Raoul Dufy's mesmerizing testament to the promise of technology, "La Fee Electricite" (The Electricity Fairy, 1937-38), which recounts from right to left the story of electricity and its applications, from the ancient observations of lightning and other natural phenomena to 20th century industrialization. The enormous work, measuring 10 meters by 60 meters, is Dufy's replica of his monumental commission for the 1937 exhibition's Palais de la Lumiere.

Gagneux said the project had been possible because the Musee d'Art Moderne was closed for security improvements and credited the museum director, Suzanne Page, for permitting the works to travel. Even in Paris, she said, it can be difficult to find fine art and design of this period exhibited in concert, as it has been in this exhibition.

Gagneux's only disappointment with Mississippi, it seems, is that she had no time to explore the Deep South that she had heard so much about. "I would like to see the steamers, the plantations, the Delta blues country, but I have no time because of my work here," said Gagneux, who returned to Paris after the opening. "What I have discovered about the South is the people and the cooking. I've eaten crab cakes, catfish -- very spicy!"

Gagneux said that she arrived in Houston exhausted after 15 hours of flying on a cargo plane via Mexico City. "I traveled to Jackson in one of two very big trucks, you know with the two chimneys?" Gagneux said. "My drivers were Carter and Molly, and they let me sleep in the bed in the back of their truck. They had a TV, bathroom, everything! We stopped to eat at one of those-what do you call it?"

A truck stop?

"Yes. And we had a blonde waitress with all the, you know." She motioned to her head.

Big hair?

"Yes! It was like being in the Hollywood movies!"

PARIS MODERNE: ART DECO WORKS FROM THE MUSEE D'ART MODERNE DE LA VILLE DE PARIS

What: An exhibition of paintings, furniture, decorative arts and sculpture from the Paris museum. Arranged together into room environments, the pieces re-create the Parisian lifestyle during the bold and

innovative years of the 1920s and 1930s.

When: Now through July 11. Museum hours are Monday through Saturday 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Sunday noon to 6 p.m., with extended hours on Thursday until 8 p.m.

Where: The Mississippi Museum, 201 East Pascagoula St. in Jackson. From Interstate 55 take Pearl Street (Exit 96A) into downtown Jackson. Turn left at Lamar Street. The museum is one block south, at the southeast corner of Lamar and Pascagoula streets.

Tickets: Adults \$10; seniors \$9; students 6 through college \$5; children 5 and under admitted free. Call 1-866-VIEW ART or (601) 960-1515. Group prices available. www.msmuseumart.org

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