What is Art Deco?
The term comes from a French exhibition in 1925 of ‘Arts Décoratifs’ but did not enter general use until 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.

WHAT IS ART DECO?

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.

Art Deco features:
- decorative but functional air vents beneath the parapet;
- elongated metal sash windows in groups of three;
- recessed setback (or stepping) that emphasises verticality;
- decorative rain heads, also with horizontal banding;
- recessed spandrels (not always recessed); below—this spandrel is not recessed but they often are;
- a decorative rain head, also with horizontal banding;
- recessed vertical and horizontal elements;
- 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, 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, 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, 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, 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, and 'eyebrows';
- new industrial techniques and building materials;
- decorative motifs symbolic of a building's function;
1) AINSLIE PRIMARY SCHOOL (1938)
33 DONALDSON STREET, BRADDOCK
This beautiful Art Deco school, designed by Cubbert Whitley for students from the new suburbs of Ainslie, Braddon and Reid, opened in 1938. Symmetry and balance characteristic of Art Deco is evident in the semicircular driveway, the plantings of trees and shrubs, and most strikingly in the balanced façade of the building itself, its roof hidden behind parapet walls. The entrance hall, the portico and the steps that recess step gracefully down from the central portico, to the windows, the attractive grooved rain heads, the down pipes and even the different sized chevron air vents. Instead of disguising these practical features, they are made central to the design and decoration in a marriage of form and function.

Balance between horizontal and vertical elements is a key feature. Vertically is enhanced by narrow setbacks in the façade, by elongated windows, rain heads and down pipes. In the central portico, the vertical glazing bars are emphasised in the window, front door, and the fluted columnar mouldings either side of the central window. Horizontal features can be seen in the lines along the top of the parapet wall, the blocks framing the entrance door, the horizontal glazing bars in the windows, and the lines where the red brick base meets the rendered walls. Some features tie horizontal and vertical elements together. Look at the zigzag parapets at each corner of the central parapet, repeated at the top of the central window and above the entrance doors. A similar effect is achieved by the scalloped moulding above the first side windows and around the Art Deco eyebrow feature over the porch.

Other features to look for include the bronze door and lights that frame it, the flagpole, the terrazzo door step, and the school lettering with its characteristic Art Deco font with low-cased E, A and H.

2) AINSLIE PUBLIC SCHOOL (1927)
ELOQUERA STREET, BRADDOCK
It is worth a detour to the front of the original Ainslie Public School, opened ten years before the Primary School. It is a good example of the Stripped Classical style popular in 1920s public buildings. Other terms for Stripped Classical are Tentative Modernism or Austere Art Deco and this building is an obvious precursor to its Art Deco neighbour. Both buildings share a love of symmetry and balance evident in the wings, driveway, air vents, down pipes, the positioning of the windows and the tree plantings. The visible lipped terracotta roof, though, changes the overall effect. Both share decorative rain heads and railings, but in a slightly different style. The entrance portico, supported by columns, emphasises a classical style, but the horizontal banding along the parapet wall and the stepped roof line above the portico anticipate and highlight the soaring vertical stepped elements and decorative detail of the Art Deco Primary School. Note the interpretive signage.

3) BRADDOCK HERITAGE AREA
Between the school and Gorman House, walkers pass through the suburb of Braddon, built in 1921-22 for base grade public servants in the Garden City style. Some Art Deco design elements can be seen on a number of cottages, particularly in the stepping around the porches.

4) GORMAN HOUSE
This residential hotel was built in 1924 for public servants coming to Canberra to prepare for the relocation of Federal Parliament and services. The design draws on the popular Garden Pavilion style considered appropriate to the Australian climate. Note the signage near the Ainslie Avenue entrance.

5) REID HERITAGE AREA
The Garden City suburb of Reid was constructed in 1926-27 for middle ranking public servants. The houses, influenced by the California Bungalow style, are set around community open space. Decorative features, often in geometric forms, can be found above windows, on chimneys, gables and porches. As you walk round, look for the following Art Deco elements:
- the curved marble staircase, to the right of the entrance hall, that leads to the Roll of Honour of Australia's war dead, set into bronze panels;
- the large decorative geometric features adjacent to the flat roof above the entrance hall;
- the bronze chains that prevent access to this area;
- more decorative air vents, symmetrically placed around the courtyard behind horizontal banding;
- the 26 sandstone gargoyles, representing the people and fauna of ancient Australia, designed by Leslie Bowles, sculptor.

When you reach the raised courtyard in front of the Hall of Memory, look back to see Capital Hill and New Parliament House framed by the dramatic pylons. This is a mirror image of the view from the front of the building.

HALL OF MEMORY
The portico with its fine fluted columns contains a second set of decorative doors, with panels representing the coat of arms of each state. The interior of the Hall, its circular form, is reminiscent of the Alhambra palace in Moorish Spain and the Mughal Taj Mahal. Travel in the early twentieth century had encouraged interest in all these architectural forms.

The stained glass windows were completed in the 1940s. The six million individual mosaics on the cupola (centre of the domed ceiling) and interior walls were imported from Italy and installed in 1960. Present fine examples of Art Deco style were designed by M. Napier Walker, a Victorian artist. Try to identify the following elements within the detail:
- the outer corium of the dome featuring stylised images symbolic of Australia: bulrushes, black swans and a wattle of wattle leaves;
- above them, pairs of hands release the dead in the form of winged sarcophagi (stone coffins) drawing on Ancient Egyptian or Greek symbolism;
- the brilliant sun, its seven rays representing the seven-pointed federal star, set within the Southern Cross, in the cupola;
- other geometric or sunburst motifs among the mosaics;
- the different branches and qualities of the Armed Forces, represented in the stained glass windows, along with complex symbolic features relating to each quality.

7) MERCURE CANBERRA, 39 LIMESTONE AVENUE
Mercure Canberra (formerly The Ainslie Hotel) built in 1927, is another example of accommodation built for public servants and visitors to the new city. Designed by Sydney architectural company, Burcham Clamp and Finch, who also designed the Canberra Grammar School in 1928, this building has Art Deco elements and was designed by M. Napier Walker, a Victorian artist. Try to identify the following elements within the detail:
- the outer corium of the dome featuring stylised images symbolic of Australia: bulrushes, black swans and a wattle of wattle leaves;
- above them, pairs of hands release the dead in the form of winged sarcophagi (stone coffins) drawing on Ancient Egyptian or Greek symbolism;
- the bright sun, its seven rays representing the seven-pointed federal star, set within the Southern Cross, in the cupola;
- other geometric or sunburst motifs among the mosaics;
- the different branches and qualities of the Armed Forces, represented in the stained glass windows, along with complex symbolic features relating to each quality.

8) STREET FURNITURE
Between this junction and Donaldson Street, the wide nature strip down the centre of Limestone Avenue was planted with Australian natives in 1928. A white painted concrete seat in stepped, curvilinear Art Deco style was placed at either end to commemorate the plantings.

9) ALT CRESCENT HERITAGE PRECINCT
Continue along Limestone Avenue and turn right up Alt Crescent, a curvilinear row of seven houses facing a small reserve. This is the third Garden City Precinct passed through on this walk and contains buildings built in 1926 for founding staff of the FCC. See the interpretive signage. Turn left at the junction of Limestone Avenue and Donaldson Street and continue to the front of Ainslie Primary School where our walk ends.