Art Deco: 1910-1939 is a comprehensive exhibition celebrating the significant period in which its glamour and style influenced design worldwide. Direct from London’s famed Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), the exhibition is staged exclusively at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV); the fifth exhibition in the extremely popular Melbourne Winter Masterpieces series, and the first to feature the decorative arts, with over 300 works on display.

above, Oliver Bernard (designer) England 1881–1939 Strand Palace Hotel staircase 1930–31 glass (lit), chrome 370.8 x 447.5 x 444.7 cm (main), 261.0 cm (stairs) Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Exhibition structure
The exhibition explores the chronological development of Art Deco, from its origins in Europe during the years leading up to the First World War, to the explosion of the movement at the 1925 Paris Exposition, and its enormous popularity and influence on design to countries across the globe. *Art Deco 1910-1939* pays particular attention to the major influence of Deco in Australia, dedicating an entire section to Australian architecture, fine arts and product design.

A global influence
The scope of Art Deco’s influence is accurately represented in the exhibition by the display of a wide range of artistic media including painting, jewellery, ceramics and glassware, fashion, industrial design, graphic design, film, architecture and interior design, automotive design, photography and furniture design. Also well represented is the spread of Art Deco at a global level, with featured art and design pieces from Europe, the USA, Asia as well as Australia and New Zealand.

Origins
Art Deco first appeared in Europe, in the years before the First World War. The movement developed in many of the cities where Art Nouveau was popular, and in the years following the war Art Deco’s own popularity and influence on art and design grew quickly, its influence spreading worldwide. The highpoint of this time was the 1925 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, the first world fair dedicated to modern decorative arts. In the 6-month duration of the exhibition, 16 million visitors came from around the world to view the latest offerings in Art Deco design, which also served to reassert France’s reputation as the arbiter of taste and producer of luxury goods, as well as the centre of fashion, internationally.

Inspired by the ancient, the exotic and the avant-garde
Art Deco itself is influenced by many factors, most significantly by ancient and exotic inspirations as well as styles from the avant-garde movements. Motifs, symbols and imagery from exotic cultures were widely appropriated to the style of Art Deco designs. Paul Colin’s depiction of cabaret dancer Josephine Baker, featured in the Exotic section of the exhibition, illustrates Art Deco’s fascination for the exotic.

The Avant-Garde also had a strong influence on the development of the Art Deco style, in which the art of French Cubism, Orphism, Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism gave designers a fundamentally new and modern language of forms. These ideas were applied to graphics and textile designs, decoration of ceramics and glassware, as well as architecture, interior design and photography.

The 1925 Paris Exposition
The 1925 Paris Exposition can be regarded as the belated ‘launch’ of Art Deco; the moment at which the style exploded onto the main global stage, while reinstating France’s position as a trendsetter and world centre for style at the time. The Exposition included paintings from Jean Dupas; furniture design from Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann, Sir Edward Maufe, Louis Süe and André Mare; François Pompon’s sculptures including the famous Polar bear; silversmith Jean Puiforcat’s designs; glass pieces from René Lalique, Maurice Marinot and Edward Hald; glamorous jewellery by Louis Cartier and fashion by couture houses Madeleine Vionnet and Maison Myrbor.

Also exhibiting at the Exposition were works from designers Jean Dunand, Henri Rapin, Pierre Legrain, Rose Adler, Thayaht, F. Gregory Brown, Gio Ponti and Josef Hoffman.
The Art Deco streamlined lifestyle

A number of these pieces are exhibited in Art Deco 1910-1939, including Louis Cartier’s Tutti Frutti strap bracelet and double-clip brooch, a complex arrangement of coloured precious stones including ruby, emerald and sapphire. These pieces were sold to Cole Porter’s wife Linda Lee Thomas, whose fame adds to the glamorous appeal of this jewellery.

Other glamorous pieces featured in the exhibition are Coco Chanel’s dresses. Extending ideas from pre-First World War designer Paul Poiret, Chanel and Jean Patou created dresses that were designed to reflect the 1920s lifestyle of attending cocktail bars and the cinema. Hair and dresses were cut shorter, the latter to allow women to dance the Charleston, and accessories were designed to match.

The Art Deco style of streamlining influenced not only products and architecture, but the streamlined silhouette was also a coveted style in dress design. A significant practice in fashion design in this time was that of the bias cut in garment construction. This involves the woven fabric being cut on the diagonal to the direction of the weave, which provides greater elasticity and more fluid draping. Designers such as Charles James used this practice to produce sleek designs in matt silk crêpe or smooth glossy satin, which were sophisticated and very Art Deco.

Other highlights of the exhibition include Tamara de Lempicka’s The telephone II from 1930, and the stunning installation of the original architectural elements from the foyer of the Strand Palace Hotel from London’s West End, rescued by the V&A during the demolition of the foyer space in 1969.

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of Art Deco’s influence on architecture is that of the skyscraper. As well as a striking symbol of modernity, the spectacle of the towering skyscraper also signifies the impact of the new modern style on the art and lifestyle of America. As the style of Art Deco spread from Europe to the United States and the rest of the world, so the American interpretation of Art Deco was shown and promoted to international audiences via the Hollywood film.

Travel and transportation

Travel is also an important inclusion in the exhibition, particularly film footage of the interior design of the Normandie, is featured in the Travel and Transportation section. The depictions of other modes of transport of this era, including grand luxury liners, streamlined trains and motor cars, as well as the exotic tourist destinations communicates the extent of Art Deco’s influence on mass culture and the modern world. Motor vehicle design is featured with the 1937 Cord 812 Westchester sedan, produced by Auburn Automobile Company in Indiana, USA, given a prominent position in the exhibition.

Deco Down Under

One section of Art Deco 1910-1939 has an entirely Australian focus, displaying its architecture, fine arts and product design. Historical photographs highlight the Sydney Harbour Bridge as being one of the most striking examples of this country’s architectural design, although local architecture in cities, suburbs and towns throughout Australia were strongly influenced by Art Deco. From the mass-produced objects of glassware and ceramics to distinctive handcrafted items of similar products, Australian Art Deco reflects unique national characteristics while at the same time embracing international modernity and Australia’s enthusiasm to be considered part of the global community.

This extensive exhibition is at once a nostalgic tour of the past and also a celebration of style that has never truly gone out of fashion.