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BOOKS

Great pictures — like this book illustration, left, poster and book cover — outshine text of "Art Deco Graphics."

Illustrations: 10, text: 3

ART DECO GRAPHICS
By Patricia Frantz Kery. Abrams. 512 pages. $49.50

By Hunter Drohojowska

This is a volume that has "gift book" slathered all over its pretty face. But appearances is just about all "Art Deco Graphics" has going for it. Although the melding of fine art and the mass media in the first decades of this century had wide-ranging and historically significant implications for the development of modern and contemporary art, don't expect to read about it here.

This lavish book by New York gallery owner Patricia Frantz Kery is accurately defined on its jacket flap as a "source book" for "collectors, designers, illustrators, art directors, photographers, scholars . . ." Whoops! Scholars? Well, I don't think so. The text of this book is basically a primer on Deco graphics for the amateur in art appreciation.

Kery begins by attempting to legitimize Art Deco by linking it to oodles of 'isms, and to unexpected sources such as George Braque and Wassily Kandinsky. By chapter two, we are confounded by this observation: "Art Deco painters often seemed preoccupied with representing attractive women." But in what period of art were they not? Kery forges ahead to discuss Tamara de Lempicka (the popular play with the movable audience is her namesake). Kery tells us that Tamara, "who was perhaps the best of all in painting the women of her times, herself represented the ideal woman of the '20s: She was beautiful, stylish, rich and famous, and she moved in the best avant-garde circles." Kery doesn't mention Tamara's "friend," Fascist poet D'Annunzio, but now that she's established ideal womanhood, we know what to expect from the rest of the book.

Fabulous is a word that floats to mind. Fabulous as in unreal, picturesque, separate from the quotidian affairs of the world and as in style as distinct from content. The graphics in this book, created between the tumultuous '20s and the advent of World War II, present life as a cabaret. But this performance has none of the irony or despair that characterized the life and the art of the times. Whenever a politically disturbing graphic slips in, seemingly by accident or because it is visually arresting, Kery tells us little about it. For instance, an extraordinary image by El Lissitzky was created for an exhibition of Russian art in Zurich in 1929. (It's on page 110.) The dual heads of a young man and woman are rooted in a constructivist billboard announcing the show, but the letters U.S.S.R. are branded across their frontal lobes, melding them into one common forehead. Although the youths are smiling, the grins are forced and vacant and their eyes glitter weirdly in dark hollows. They are caricatures of the hopeful, happy socialist youth staring optimistically toward the future. This image alone tells us that the graphic was produced in the period between the censorship and destruction of the Russian Avant-Garde and the rise of the deadening Social Realism of the Stalin era. Yet Kery writes: "It depicts two young people facing the future, and functions as a propaganda instrument as well as an exhibition poster."

If one is not feeling cranky, however, one has to admit that this is a beautifully produced book, rife with pictures so powerful, so inventive, they have survived to inspire half of the commercial imagery seen today. Restricted to this level, the book is sort of enjoyable. A lavish volume for those who don't want to ask that trite but nagging question, "Where's the beef?"

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