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Paul Frankl

Paul Frankl (1887-1958) was older than Deskey, but equally committed to a new style of design. Born in Vienna and educated as an architect, he emigrated to the U.S. in 1914. By 1924 he had a showroom on Madison Avenue, where he sold furniture of his own design as well as European imports. He was a defender of any modern style and wrote five books and numerous magazine articles to publicize his conviction that the new was better than the old. Writing in 1927, Frankl enumerated the characteristics of modern design: simplicity, plain surfaces, unbroken lines, accentuation of structural necessity, dramatization of the intrinsic beauty of materials, and the elimination of meaningless and distracting motives of the past.¹

By 1925, Frankl had invented a flexible style that was as modern as the American city: “skyscraper” furniture. He was inspired by the new steel towers that were rising all over Manhattan. New York City had enacted setback regulations so that light and fresh air could reach street level. Towers had to be terraced, at prescribed heights, which gave skyscrapers in Manhattan a distinctive form. Frankl adapted the profile for furniture.

Of course, the idea of patterning furniture after a skyscraper is a little silly. (But there is an architectonic relationship; furniture patterned after Gothic and Roman architectural details was commonplace in the 19th century.) Frankl offered some interesting justifications. First, the skyscraper was a potent symbol of the moment. As he put it, “modernity expresses itself in the energy of the vertical thrust of towering buildings that push themselves through the crumbling red husks of the city of the past.”¹ Second, because his blocky forms lacked ornament, they were

easier to clean than the decorations of most revival furniture. And, for urban apartment-dwellers, tall pieces saved floor space.

Most of Frankl's skyscraper forms were bookcase-cabinet combinations. The exteriors were often plain wood, which was curious considering his insistence on symbolizing the modern city. But he respected wood and felt its beauty should be revealed. For contrast, the interiors of the bookshelves were often lacquered red, blue or green. Edges were outlined in black. To provide rhythm and variety, some shelves faced sideways, so that book spines would alternate with blocks of wood in an asymmetrical composition. The effect was not just a tower, but visual syncopation.

In this furniture, Frankl invented an authentically American form. The wooden surfaces connected them to the past; their symbolism looked forward to the "Machine Age" of the 1930s. But the Depression put an end to them: no new skyscrapers were erected after 1932. Symbols of progress and urbanity seemed hollow in an era of economic collapse. Frankl admitted defeat in 1932, saying "skyscrapers...are a passing fad. The tallest of them, the Empire State, is but the tombstone on the grave of the era that built it...skyscrapers are monuments to the greedy."¹