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Donald Deskey

The epitome of American Art Moderne furniture was probably that used in the private apartment of the Radio City Music Hall's project manager, movie-theater mogul Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel. In June 1932, Donald Deskey won the commission for decoration of the theater, lobby, lounges and the apartment. He collaborated with architect Wallace Harrison, but the furniture and many of the surfaces were his own. In the main floor men's smoking room, he covered the walls with cork and the ceiling with polished copper. In keeping with the rest of Rockefeller Center, Deskey invited leading artists to contribute. Painters Stuart Davis and Yasuo Kuniyoshi did murals, Henry Varnum Poor made ceramic lamp bases and ashtrays and Ruth Reeves designed carpets and other textiles.

The high point was Rothafel's apartment, which has survived. It features a living room with gold-colored ceilings nearly 18 feet high and is paneled with rare quilted cherry veneers. A round dining room is dominated by a circular table with a light in the center. Deskey's side tables feature U-shaped supports in brushed aluminum; some have Bakelite tops. The U motif is an abstract version of the shield and urn shapes used in Louis XVI Neo-Classical furniture, adding a French flavor to the design. Even a table lamp has the aluminum U. Playing with his motif, Deskey designed another table that sits on two facing Js. In spite of the machine aesthetic and industrial materials, all the furniture was custom made by hand. It is a rare example of American furniture design in the 1930s devoted single-mindedly to luxury. Later in the '30s, Deskey became more of a true industrial designer. Some of his graphic designs are still recognizable today, including the Crest Toothpaste logo and the Tide bullseye.