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Panel on "Problematizing representations of Female Bodies"

Representation of women in the age of Art Deco

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In order to understand the way in which the representations of women in the age of Art Deco notably demonstrate gender and racial problems, we have to consider the deep-rooted relationship between Art Deco and Imperial colonialism. In 1925, for example, there were the colonial pavilions in the Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes in Paris. Many principal Art Deco designers also participated in the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris. Moreover, one of the defining characteristics of Art Deco, the "Exotic," should also be contextualized in the larger colonialist discourses of the era. Tropical woods, luxurious materials, and the iconography of tropical animals and zigzags gave an exotic flourish to all kinds of design. One result of such prevalence of the exotic is what Rosalind Krauss coined "Black Deco," a certain attitude in art style that recombined and transmuted the original African examples and images. Moreover, French Art Deco designers and artistes represented the colonies as bodies of submissive women who participated in the traditional handcrafts or folk performing arts. Josephine Baker, star of the *Revue nègre* in 1925 Paris, was also consumed as an imperialism icon. Art Deco characteristics of style in figures, such as smooth and polished surface, simple form, and clear contour, are best exemplified by mannequins by Siégl. In this stylistic configuration, bodies of the (racial, sexual, and cultural) Others were integrated into occidental gender system that erased all traces of abject in such bodies, and presented them as beautiful and safe images to the gaze of heterosexual white men.