Chrysler Building

A Towering Icon of Art Deco

Skyscrapers were invented in Chicago in the 1880s. But it was in Manhattan, in the late 1920s, that the contest to erect grand and tall buildings really heated up. The reasons included personal and civic pride, and the rising cost of land in New York City.

By 1928, Art Deco skyscrapers were going up all over Manhattan. Architect William Van Alen (1883-1954) announced that his project for automobile magnate Walter P. Chrysler would stand 925 ft. high. But Van Alen's ex-partner (and now rival) H. Craig Severance, with Yasuo Matsui, designed a 927-ft. skyscraper for the Bank of Manhattan. It boasted 60 stories, ten penthouses, a giant lantern, and a 50-foot flagpole. Van Alen learned of this plan in late 1929. He secretly constructed a 185-ft. vertex (*or* spire) inside the fire shaft of his own nearly completed tower. When the timing was right, he erected the vertex in 90 minutes. New York was stunned.

At 1,046 ft., the Chrysler Building surpassed the recently completed Bank of Manhattan Building on Wall Street (briefly the world's tallest building), the Woolworth Building on Broadway (at 793.5 ft., the tallest from 1913-1930), and even the Eiffel Tower (1,024 ft.; the world's tallest structure at that time). Just a few months later, however, the Empire State Building topped them all, at 1,250 ft. The Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, and Rockefeller Center (which dates from the early 1930s) are perhaps New York's most famous Art Deco skyscrapers.

"Art Deco" means more than one thing. The Chrysler Building's interior Art Deco features are opulent, sometimes even "old-fashioned." But the exterior design favors abstraction. Details include a band of highly stylized automobile images at the 31st floor. This frieze ends at the corners in "gargoyles" derived from the Chrysler "Mercury-wing" radiator-cap ornament. Above all, there is the spectacular crown. Its overlapping discs suggest the spokes and rim of the automobile wheel. They also echo the crown of the Statue of Liberty. However, these rising "sunbursts" become increasingly elongated, abstracted parabolas. Ultimately they disappear into a gleaming steel spire that pierces the sky.