

## L.A. Then and Now; An Art Deco Jewel With a Glittery History

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Like the jewel box it is, downtown's Oviatt Building conceals its real treasures. But even casual passersby can get a hint of the extraordinary elegance inside by glancing at the building's nymph-crowned gates or the marquee with its deeply hued frosted glass.

James Oviatt set out to build a top-line haberdashery, not a temple to the Art Deco style. Yet his 1925 visit to the Deco wonders of the Paris Exposition forever altered his tastes and his vision of the building that would house Alexander and Oviatt, then Los Angeles' most elegant men's shop.

From his split-level hideaway in the building's penthouse, which he romantically called a "castle in the air," Oviatt reigned over an army of style-conscious salespeople who gave Angelenos good old-fashioned service and tailored quality--all with a hefty price tag.

In fact, though his legendary penthouse poker and dinner parties made him the subject of local gossip, Oviatt's impeccable taste and business savvy endeared him to his 50 employees, all of whom received a 40% discount on the store's merchandise.

Oviatt's career as a haberdasher began in 1906, when he landed a job at Desmond's department store soon after arriving in Los Angeles. After rising to an executive position with the company, he grew disenchanted and opened a swanky men's store with business partner Frank Alexander at 6th and Hill streets in 1911.

Calling his venture Alexander and Oviatt, he stocked his store with garments obtained during frequent European buying trips.

Soon, his wish list extended well beyond suits and shirts. Captivated by the Art Deco style that emerged in the 1920s, Oviatt scoured Europe--and especially France--for the finest craftsmen, designs and material to use in constructing a building and penthouse at Olive and 6th streets.

The site, which he leased from the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, was cater-cornered from Pershing Square, and there, with the Pacific Mutual Life Insurance building and the Biltmore Hotel nearby, Oviatt began constructing the city's first Art Deco building in 1927.

He wanted the best money could buy. Knowing style and design, he commissioned a host of French designers and artisans, among them the fabled French jeweler and art glass designer Rene Lalique.

In fact, Oviatt's building was the first and largest commercial project that Lalique ever undertook. More than 30 tons of custom-designed art glass was shipped to Los Angeles from Paris through the Panama Canal in 1928--lamps, panels, windows, display cases and a vast ceiling. By completion, there was reportedly more Lalique glass in Oviatt's building than at any other single site in the world.

Just as novel was the lavish use of a new, silvery metal, an alloy of nickel, zinc and copper called maillechort, the combined names of its two inventors. It was used to make the custom mailbox and elevator doors.

Designed by two stalwarts of Los Angeles architecture, Albert Walker and Percy A. Eisen, the building was steel-reinforced, far ahead of the requirements of its day. Virtually all of its fittings were French.

Throughout the building today, French marble reaches to the ceiling in the Gothic-arched corridors, and the elaborate English oak trim extends to elevators, corridors and above doors. In much of the wood, carved angels connote the project's site in "the City of Angels."



*High-fashion haberdasher James Oviatt and wife, Mary, at the horse races in the 1950s.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Los Angeles Public Library*

In Oviatt's day, two floors and the mezzanine of the 12-story building--as tall as a building could then legally be in Los Angeles - were given over to luxury goods displayed against a backdrop of marble, burlled wood and art glass. On the first floor were sweaters, shirts and hats, and on the second were Oviatt's custom clothes, suits of superb European fabric and cut, as well as shoes, riding clothes and leather goods. Some were laid out in what the opening-day announcement called the "Outdoor California Palm Grove," which "enhances the charm of the shop and permits the inspection of clothing in natural daylight."

The mezzanine was a "feminine paradise" of clothes, goods and gifts of "decorative art for the home."

The penthouse was even more luxurious. The appointments, likewise by Lalique and by French cabinetmaker Georges Sadier, turned the dozen rooms into a gem of Art Deco, from the spider-web marquetry of the drawing room floor to the cut-velvet rose upholstery on furniture of Oviatt's own design.

Oviatt's love of color is still evident in the deep magenta silk wall hangings, the crimson-topped dining table, the glazed plaster bathroom walls the shade of cinnabar. There is even a Sadier et Fils-designed bar, its pale woods contrasting with bar stools upholstered in zebra skin.

The Lalique-lighted corridor is Oviatt's literal hall of fame, hung with photographs of his friends and clients--Cecil B. DeMille, John Barrymore, Gary Cooper, Errol Flynn, Clark Gable and Hollywood's best dressed man, Adolphe Menjou.

The quirkiest room in the penthouse--which today is open only for private parties--has to be the replica of a Pullman-car stateroom, but even that is outdone by the two-story rooftop resort. Its three-faced neon clock was the first of its kind in the city; over the holidays, chimes played Christmas carols.

Oviatt's "castle in the air" was his private playground, even more luxurious than the goods he sold. On one level was a swimming "basin," a tennis court, gardens and putting green; the second was devoted to his private "beach." At a time when the ocean could still be seen from this lofty downtown altitude, Oviatt imported French sand so he could bask in the California sunlight with his wife.

He chose his wife as he did his building's style--on sight.

Seldom speaking to any of his employees, the short, stocky perfectionist daily whisked white-gloved hands over counter tops and glass cases while clerks watched in awe. On one such occasion, in 1945, he spotted 22-year-old saleswoman Mary Richards, summoned her to the penthouse and proposed marriage.

In the whirl of the descending elevator, she calculated how much merchandise she had on layaway and the next day, in answer to his proposal, had all of her purchases sent up to the penthouse--along with the hefty bill.

Later, Oviatt built a rooftop playhouse for her small daughter and their son, James Oviatt Jr.

Oviatt's store closed in 1969, but the old couple continued to share the rooftop residence until their deaths in the 1970s. James passed his last years peppering the letters columns of local newspapers with opinions that sprang from his long membership in the John Birch Society.

The Oviatt Building was declared a cultural historic monument in 1978. Since then, two chic restaurants have occupied the old salesrooms; occasionally the gaiety from the nearby Academy Awards ceremony has continued on the premises.

It is a particularly appropriate use, since the first dramatic film ever made entirely in Los Angeles was shot not in Hollywood but downtown--less than two blocks south of the future site of the Oviatt, in a vacant lot next to the Sing Kee Chinese laundry near Olive and 7th streets, in 1907.

"In the Power of the Sultan" starred stage-actor-turned-silent- film-performer Hobart Bosworth, the replacement for another actor who had left the Chicago-based Selig Co. Bosworth found the climate so salubrious after his recent tuberculosis attack that he persuaded Selig to move his entire operation here, thus helping to lay the groundwork for the flourishing of the industry whose future stars would patronize the clothing store that so elegantly received them.