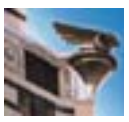
WILLIAM VAN ALEN [1883–1954]

15b The Chrysler Building, 1926–1930

The Chrysler Building could only have been constructed in the competitive climate of Manhattan in the 1920s. The American economy was flourishing, and there was not enough office space to go around; urban builders were encouraged to aim high. In 1926, Walter P. Chrysler, one of the wealthiest men in the automotive industry, entered his bid in the unofficial competition to build the tallest structure in New York City. He wanted an office building exalted enough to symbolize his own astounding ascent in the business world. Brooklyn-born architect William Van Alen, who had a reputation for progressive, flamboyant design, met Chrysler's challenge with a seventy-seven-story building, the first in the world to exceed a height of one thousand feet.

The pyramidal form of the Chrysler Building was dictated by a 1916 zoning ordinance requiring buildings to be stepped back as they rose to allow sunlight to reach the streets. This restriction allowed architects to take a more sculptural approach to urban design. Instead of the tall, bland, rectangular boxes that had begun to colonize the city, inventive and dynamic forms began to lend interest and variety to the Manhattan skyline. The ordinance also focused attention on the summit of a building. Atop the Chrysler, seven overlapping arches diminish toward the top to create the illusion of a building even taller than it is. The distinctive decoration, a pattern of narrow triangles set in semicircles, has been likened to a sunburst, but it might equally recall the spokes of a wheel.



Van Alen's signal contribution to American architecture was to apply to modern skyscrapers the visual vocabulary of Art Deco, an international decorative style that emphasized streamlined motifs and often employed nontraditional materials.

To make the Chrysler Building distinct from others of its kind, Van Alen chose motifs appropriate to the machine age, particularly the automobile. The spire's gleaming stainless steel cladding calls to mind the polished chrome of a brand new car. Stylized American eagle heads protrude from some corners of the building in playful reference to the gargoyles on Gothic cathedrals. Other corners are embellished with the winged forms of a Chrysler radiator cap. One ornamental frieze incorporates a band of hubcaps.

If the exterior ornament enhances the modernity of the skyscraper, the interior was designed to recall the distant past, and positions the Chrysler Building among the wonders of the world. The most spectacular features of the grand lobby are the elevator doors, adorned in brass and marquetry (decorative inlays on a wood base) with the lotus flower motif. The discovery in 1922 of King Tutankhamen's tomb had unleashed an enthusiasm for archaic and exotic cultures, and the Chrysler Building was designed at the height of this mania for all things Egyptian. In addition to the lotus decoration, the public rooms display a range of ancient Egyptian motifs intended to suggest the building's association with the great pyramids of the pharaohs. The paintings on the lobby ceiling record the heroic progress of the tower's construction, as if the monument to Chrysler had already assumed a place in history equal to that of the Great Pyramids.

Both Chrysler and Van Alen were intent upon making this building the tallest in the city, but toward the end of construction there was uncertainty over whether it could indeed hold that distinction. A rapidly rising office tower in Lower Manhattan had already reached 840 feet, and its architect, Van Alen's former business partner, who acknowledged competition from the Chrysler, pushed his building even higher by adding a sixty-foot steel cap. Not to be outdone, Van Alen had his workers secretly assemble a twenty-seven-ton steel tip, or vertex, which was hoisted at the last minute to the top of the building as a magnificent surprise to the city. With that, the Chrysler not only exceeded the height of its Wall Street competition, but surpassed even the Eiffel Tower in Paris. As it happened, that hard-won prize would be lost within the year to the Empire State Building, which is 202 feet higher.

William Van Alen's reputation suffered after the completion of his most famous building. Accused by Chrysler of taking bribes from contractors, the architect never received full payment for his work. The effects of the Depression on the building industry further added to his woes. Today, Van Alen, with no major studies dedicated to his work, is little known in the history of architecture. On his death, the *New York Times* failed to even publish an obituary.

William Van Alen (1883–1954), The Chrysler Building, 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, New York, 1926–1930. Steel frame, brick, concrete, masonry, and metal cladding, height 1046 ft. (318.82 m.).

15-B.1 *right,* The Chrysler Building, Manhattan, 1930. Photographic print. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

15-B.2 *top left,* detail. Steeple of the Chrysler Building. © Photo Company/zefa/CORBIS.

15-B.3 *top center left,* detail. Workers waterproofing Art Deco stainless steel eagle ornament of sixty-first floor. © Nathan Benn/CORBIS.

15-B.4 *bottom center left,* detail. Thirty-first floor decoration based on radiator cap and hubcap designs. Photograph by Scott Murphy, Ambient Images, Inc.

15-B.5 *bottom left,* detail. Art Deco elevator doors at the Chrysler Building. © Nathan Benn/CORBIS.

Encourage students to look closely at all the parts of this building.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E

Ask students to locate triangles, squares, rectangles, and semi-circles on the Chrysler Building.

Semi-circles and triangles are near the top. Squares and rectangles form the windows. Some of the triangles are windows. These geometric shapes were important to Art Deco-style architecture.

E | M | S

Focus students' attention on the metal sculpture detail in 15-B.4. What does it look like?

What might it symbolize?

It might suggest an animal or the winged cap of the ancient Roman god, Mercury. It also suggests speed.

Why does this look man-made rather than like a natural object?

The shapes have been simplified and streamlined into geometric forms.

Notice that this sculpture stands on a round base. Have students locate these large replicas of a 1929 Chrysler radiator cap on the corners of the thirty-first floor.

E | M | S

Call students' attention to a worker waterproofing a detail ornament (15-B.3). Ask students what animal the ornament represents.

It represents an eagle.

Have students find the ornaments that project outward like medieval gargoyles above the sixty-first floor.

E | M | S

As students look at the elevator doors (lower left detail), ask them to find the stylized flower and plant shapes. The large central flower is a lotus blossom, an important symbol in ancient Egypt. Notice how arcs divide this design into geometric shapes. Ask students to identify another vertical series of arcs on this building.

The sunburst arches at the top of the building are a series of arcs similar to this.

INTERPRET

E | M | S

How is this building like an automobile?

Parts of it are of shiny steel like a new car, and it has decorations that look like hubcaps and radiator caps.

S

Why did corporations and architects race to build tall skyscrapers in the 1920s?

The economy was flourishing, corporations needed more office space, and Chrysler wanted to own the tallest building in New York City.

Why do you think the spire was added to the top?

It was added to make it taller than all the other buildings.

What happened in 1929 to halt this building spree?

The stock market crashed.

S

New York City building codes required that tall buildings such as this step back their upper stories. What were the benefits of making tall buildings smaller near the top?

This allowed more light and air to reach the streets and made the buildings look even taller than they really were.

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: modern age; machine age; automobile industry; skyscrapers; Roaring Twenties

Science: engineering; steel

Arts: Art Deco; architecture