

# HELSINKI CENTRAL RAILWAY STATION: AN EARLY ART DECO MASTERPIECE

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- LEFT:** Helsinki Station clock tower
- MIDDLE:** Helsinki Station entrance
- UPPER RIGHT:** Statues at entrance to station – side view
- LOWER RIGHT:** Statue on eastern side of railway station - detail

Helsinki in early autumn is a delightful Nordic city with wonderful sights, great food and generous citizens whose English is as perfect as their Finnish language is impregnable. Jan and I were happily window shopping in the city centre, working our way towards the Art Gallery (which by the way is sensational even though the entry fee is daunting) when we entered the large square which is the transport hub for the main railway station.

Helsinki is not the place one expects to find great Art Deco architecture so the sight of the Central Railway Station building brought an audible gasp from both of us. The first treat is the clock tower with four vertical brick pedestals (actually pink Finnish granite) ending in a glorious blue/green verdigris copper cap containing the clock on four faces. Each of the pedestals and the clock is surmounted with a cone made up of bevelled squares. Then the main station comes into view with an elegant arch over the entrance, overlaid with a thin scalloped copper framework. On each side are supporting columnar granite edifices with copper capping. In the front of each of these are two stunning stylised human figures each holding a spherical ball. The effect of the spherical balls is highlighted at night

when they are illuminated and provide a guide to the main entrance between them.

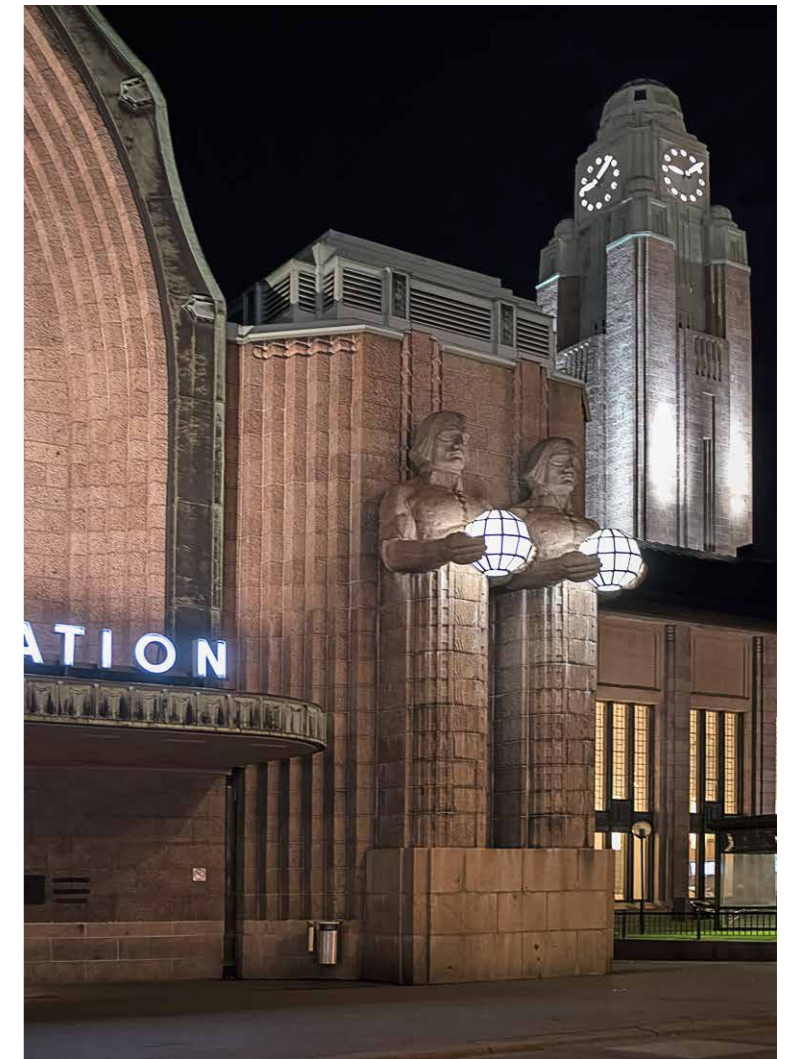
The main station entrance has a sense of majesty much like the Egyptian tombs at Abu Simbel but predate by a decade the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and the subsequent incorporation of Egyptian motifs into the Art Deco style. The statues with their arms outstretched provide quite a benign welcome in keeping with the fact that the station is Finland's most visited building, being used by some 200,000 passengers each day.

There was another surprise about this building. It was designed by Eliel Saarinen in 1904 and constructed between 1910 and 1914. While Art Deco is often dated from 1910-1939, most of the famous buildings of the style were erected in the 1930s and so this is arguably one of the earliest examples of substantial Art Deco architecture anywhere in the world. The turn of the century was a time when the desire for Finnish independence from Russia fuelled the National Romantic movement and this in turn impacted on architecture. Saarinen (1873-1950) won a competition for the design of the station in 1904 but the result was in fact considered too romantic. Saarinen rejected romanticism

altogether and re-designed the station completely. The new design was finished in 1909 and the station was opened in 1914.

Unlike American streamlining which eschewed most classical embellishments, much of European Art Deco incorporated elements from previous genres. However this building complex clearly departs from traditional European architectural styles of the late 19th and early 20th century and leaps into the future, albeit resonating with a flourish of Finnish history and motifs. It is described as Saarinen's best example of the Finnish Romantic Style of which he was a major proponent and which in more global terms is usually classed as 'Jugend' or 'Art Nouveau'. The period of Art Nouveau was between 1900 and 1920, but in this building complex there is little of the organic, curvilinear style of Art Nouveau and much more of the rectilinear and geometric elements so resonant of later Art Deco.

The great appeal of Art Deco is that it was the first global style movement, not only moving across the globe to almost all countries, but also being expressed locally with inclusions of national design elements representing history, iconography, flora and fauna. A good example of



**UPPER LEFT:**  
Ticketing Hall- ceiling and wall detail

**LOWER LEFT:**  
Ticketing Hall

**RIGHT:**  
Restaurant entrance and lighting-eastern side

this in Australia is the British Medical Association building in Sydney (1930), one of the earliest Art Deco buildings in Australia.

Repeating parallel lines are a feature of the station complex, with a multiplicity of vertical parallel lines in the details of the clock tower and the columns on either side of the entrance. These contrast with, yet also complement, the detail in the entrance arc with its parallel radial details below the roofline and cross hatch windows in the centre.

The men holding the lights were designed by Emil Wikstrom and perhaps represent Nordic gods or archetypal Finnish men. The eastern side of the station provides a different series of statues and motifs. The entrance is a small set of double doors with two stylised humanoid characters that may represent mythical gods or elders. The approach here is far more rigid and geometric than the main entrance statues with the vertical elements extending through the legs, arms and beard, offset by horizontal lines for the hair, eyes, mouth and elbows. The four statues at the front of the station are much in the human form, whereas the two on the side entrance seem more stylised and much less anthropomorphic in both the head and arms. The totality of these lesser statues on the eastern side of the station is one of symbolism and antiquity rendered in an abstract modern style full of hard lines and edges and devoid of any organic curves.

Adjacent to the doors and statues on the eastern side is the entrance to the restaurant (RAVINTOLA), surmounted by a classical motif with winged wheels on either side of a ball. This perhaps reflects some relationship with transport and speed. The signage for the main entrance and the restaurant are interesting in that they are quite different and yet both appear modern (i.e. 20th century styling). The main station typeface is a sans serif reminiscent of Futura which was invented in 1927. As well neon signage was only introduced in about 1910. Thus it may be that the signage on the main entrance is newer than the building. If original it is very early and futuristic for the time. The typeface for the restaurant could, on the other hand, be a 21st century bespoke graphic Deco font and is difficult to reconcile with the date and style of the rest of the building.

We did not see all the interior (much of which has been altered or modernised) but the information and ticketing hall to the left of the main entrance is clearly original. It is a large cathedral-like space with the arch on the far wall mimicking the main entrance outside. There is perhaps an overload of lines, circles and motifs on the ceilings and walls, but because it is a large interior the variety of treatments is not overwhelming. The details have more in common with Art Deco styles than Art Nouveau. There are repeating parallel lines seen in the stepped arrangements on the ceiling and walls as well as in the finer motifs.

Eiel Saarinen emigrated to the USA in 1923 after his competition entry for the Tribune Tower in Chicago won second prize. Although it was not built, the Gulf Building in Houston(1929) became a faithful realisation of his design. Saarinen first settled in Evanston, Illinois, where he worked on his scheme for the development of the Chicago lakefront. In 1924 he became a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. He designed the campus of Cranbrook Educational Community in 1925 that was intended to be an American equivalent to the Bauhaus. He taught at the Cranbrook Academy of Art and became its President in 1932. Among his student-collaborators were Ray Eames (then Ray Kaiser) and Charles Eames and Saarinen influenced their subsequent furniture design.

His son Eero (1910-1961) was an influential architect and designer famous for his neo-futuristic and modernist ideas. Eero Saarinen is now considered one of the masters of American 20th-century architecture. He trained with Charles and Ray Eames and also collaborated with them. His first major furniture design was the Tulip Chair that went into production with the Knoll furniture company. He also designed the TWA Flight Center at JFK International Airport. Eero was on the jury for the design of the Sydney Opera House and actually was a major influence in convincing a sceptical jury (which had rejected it in the first round) of the superiority of the Utzon entry.

In 2014 the BBC named Helsinki Central Railway Station as one of the 10 world's most beautiful railway stations. Only two of the top ten are in the Deco or modernist style, the other being the fascist/ modernist Santa Maria Novella Station in Florence (1934).

Perhaps Helsinki Railway Station is a fairytale design as some have described it, but for me it is a unique expression of early 20th century modern design. The station is beautiful and imposing, whether seen in the day or in the night. It is full of Art Deco features and although clearly expressing Finnish heritage, it transcends any mundane or esoteric classification to stand magnificently as an iconic Art Deco masterpiece.

**UPPER LEFT:**  
Detail of front statues illuminated

**LOWER LEFT:**  
Main entrance at night with sign and spheres illuminated

**RIGHT:**  
Illuminated main entrance tower and statues