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SPIRIT OF PROGRESS

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AN ART DECO ESTATE ON SYDNEY'S NORTH SHORE



UPPER:
Mahratta exterior from driveway forecourt

LOWER LEFT:
View from the Paul Sorensen designed garden back towards the drawing room side of the house, through the Moon Gate

LOWER RIGHT:
Mahratta port cochere with tiled cornice detailing

Situated some 26km north of Sydney on the north side of the harbour, the suburb of Wahroonga has long been renowned for its large and beautiful Victorian homes erected between 1890 and 1930. Many of these were built on large blocks with glorious gardens, tennis courts and usually with extensive boundary walls or hedges providing exclusivity and privacy for the wealthy owners. A strip of residential housing extending from Killara north to Wahroonga close to the railway line was fashionable for Sydney's professional group due to the size of the blocks of land, access to the railway and the proximity to major private schools. The construction of the Harbour

Bridge in 1932 improved road access to the north and the northern suburbs changed from orchards and market gardens to residential suburbs spreading east and west from the railway line and the Pacific Highway adjacent to it. Until the 1960s Killara and Wahroonga rated in the top 10 of Sydney's suburbs. Since then the preference for the wealthy has been to live closer to the city and today the prime suburbs are mainly on the harbour.

The Deco style architecture in Sydney is seen most prominently in commercial buildings, apartment blocks, picture theatres and pubs. Residential Deco was usually an individual choice of the owner or the architect and often



UPPER:

The Mahratta main foyer, dominated by the sweeping curved, scagliola finished staircase

LOWER LEFT:

Sculpted head detail at the base of the stairs

LOWER RIGHT:

View from the upstairs landing back down to the main lobby



OPPOSITE PAGE

UPPER LEFT:

The Mahratta main foyer, dominated by the sweeping curved, scagliola finished staircase

UPPER RIGHT:

The ballroom - distinctive features include concealed cornice lighting, covered ceiling, fireplace and marquetry floor

LOWER LEFT:

The opulent drawing room with a view out to the garden

LOWER RIGHT:

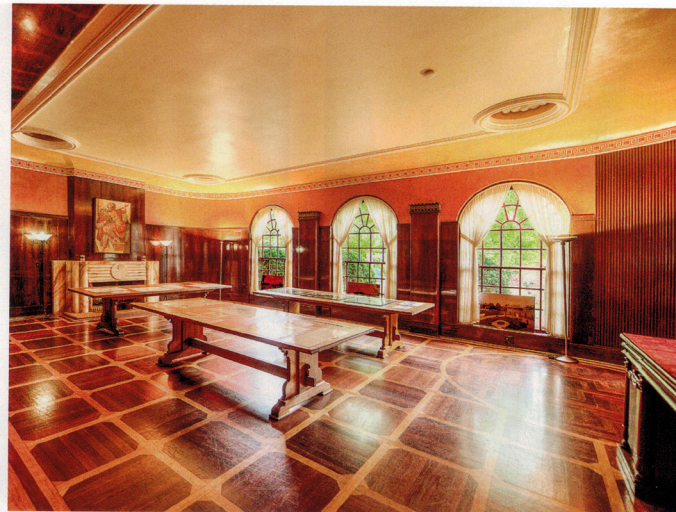
A view through the sliding ballroom door (which slides into a curved recess) back to the main lobby

included other architectural styles and Edwardian interiors. The North Shore was predominantly very conservative and this might account for the limited number of significant Art Deco homes built in the 1930s and 1940s.

Mahratta is one of the finest of the limited number of Art Deco mansions on Sydney's North Shore. Completed in 1941 it was designed in a Neo-Georgian Deco style (a mixture of Art Deco and Georgian Revival). Built on the corner of Lane Cove Road (today the Pacific Highway) and Fox Valley Road (one of the earliest roads in the Ku-ring-gai area) this land was originally known as 'Brown's Paddock'.

TA Field was a well-known and wealthy grazier and wholesale meat merchant with 17 cattle station properties throughout Australia and some butcher shops in Sydney. He bought the property in 1932 with an existing house called Mahratta and commissioned architect Douglas Agnew to demolish the old Victorian house and build the current building, with the same name, which was to be for himself and his wife and four adult children.

Mahratta was named after a Bombala sheep station in southern NSW where the grandfather of the previous owner (Mr. Allen) was the overseer. The sheep station



was owned by a former officer of the Mahratta Light Infantry of India. The word Mahratta is derived from two Sanskrit or Hindi words meaning 'the great kingdom'. It is a region of southern India, below Mumbai (Bombay) and the Mahrattans are a military people.

The grand red gravel drive winds through the extensive gardens leading to a port cochere and the front door. The simple brick exterior opens up into a house with majesty and theatrical charm, particularly in the grand entry and main hall with its curved staircase and walls and green pilasters. The building has a reverse order of use

of supporting materials. The lower floor is mainly wood and the upper level is concrete because of the extreme weight of the staircase. The first floor features an original marble bathroom.

The design of the staircase is an example of Art Deco design with a classical touch. Italian craftsmen used a very old technique (Scagliola) for the pillars and balustrade. Invented by the Romans it was revived in the Renaissance and then again in the Georgian periods of the 18th and 19th centuries. Scagliola utilises a combination of finely ground plaster of Paris mixed with a solution of glue and colour to



UPPER LEFT:
Bathroom shower detail;
small mosaic tiles were
extensively used

UPPER RIGHT:
Sitting room – note the
cornice coving & strong
chimney details

LOWER:
View through paired glass
doors along the ground
floor towards the lobby

imitate marble or alabaster which is then left worked into the shape and is highly polished. The sculptured head of the lady at the base of the stairs is the symbol of the Plume Petroleum Corporation. Mr. Field had seen it whilst in America and decided to copy it for his house.

The designs of the glass entrance doors and staircase windows above show an earlier influence of the Secession movement of Vienna in the 1920's. The sliding doors between the Ballroom and Gallery have a round glass centre and are made from Phillipine Rosewood. The Ballroom had a ceiling with deeply curved plasterwork and concealed lighting as well as a chequered inlaid sprung floor and space for a band. There was no carpet in the Gallery

so when the Ballroom was full, dancers could spread out from the Ballroom and continue dancing.

The garden was designed by landscape gardener Paul Sorenson, renowned for his ability to combine exotic and native trees and shrubs. The 1.6 hectare garden has sunken terraces featuring a rose garden and a lawn once used for putting and croquet. In 1960 the house was purchased by the Bank of NSW (Westpac) and in 1989 by the School of Philosophy who are its current custodians. They occasionally open the property to the public and raise funds for the care and preservation of the property, which is perhaps one of Sydney's last major estates from the period.