

# "An Acre of Seats in a Palace of Splendor"



## Grauman's Metropolitan Los Angeles (Later Paramount)

Opened: January 26, 1923

Architect: William Lee Wollett

Organ: Wurlitzer 4/32 Style 285

Until the coming of Art Deco, the architectural mainstream busied itself largely with the reproduction of period styles, frequently adapting them to building types entirely unknown to the ancients. The movie palace was very possibly the ultimate expression of this regime: it is difficult to think of any period style not so used somewhere or other. A few houses, however, seem to have evoked cultures and peoples still to be discovered by archeology.

Unquestionably the greatest theatre of this type was the Metropolitan, perhaps the most startling and original movie house ever built. Architect Wollett conceived it as a new structure built around the remains of something older, incorporating bits and pieces hauled in from God-knows-where. Its most immediate historical precedent may have been the Babylon set from *Intolerance*.

Its construction was equally singular. In place of the usual furred-plaster normally used in buildings of this type, the Metropolitan had an interior developed mainly of cast-in-place

*This late-'20s view shows the drapery installed early in the Paramount regime and the small grilles cut into the proscenium when the organ was moved down. One of the exposed roof trusses is visible on the right, directly above the elephant-topped column. Supposing all this to be plaster, instead of concrete, at least one wrecker was broken long before the theatre itself was.*

concrete, a revolutionary technique for its time. Most of the actual structure, including the roof trusses, was exposed. The mezzanine ceiling was nothing more than the underside of the balcony construction, gaudily painted. The finish of the auditorium was largely cement gray, its color coming from exotic hangings and fixtures designed by Wollett. The Metropolitan was also the first theatre in the world to have a Carrier-type air conditioning system.

The organ, the last of the 285s with an Echo division, was originally installed above the proscenium behind lacy metal grilles. It was later moved to chambers in the more traditional location. Neither plan was a success: one Hollywood musician recalled that when it was in the ceiling it couldn't be heard downstairs, but after it was moved, it couldn't be heard anywhere! Along with its twin, the San Francisco Granada, the organ in 1929 received a new Robert-Morton tibia in the Solo chamber, where there had been no tibia at all. The organ was broken up when the theatre closed in 1960.

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