Art deco aficionado Rick Speciale sits in front of the art deco United Way Building while holding a piece from his art deco collection.

Society's goal is preserving classic art deco

By CHRISTOPHER BAUGHMAN
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Few things excite Rick Speciale like tall buildings. "I knew as a kid that I was in love with skyscrapers," Speciale said. "I think that skyscrapers and what they stood for and stand for today had a major influence on me."

And few skyscrapers have influenced him like the Louisiana State Capitol. "Our State Capitol can hold its own with anything in this country" as an example of classic art deco, Speciale said.

Speciale is not a native of Louisiana. He hails from White Plains, N.Y., a town outside New York City. As a kid, he traveled to the Big Apple and marveled at its skyscrapers. He brought his love for the buildings and their art deco design when he came south to enter LSU years later.

Except for one brief period, the 48-year-old Speciale never left Louisiana. And last year, the vice president for agency services for the Capital Area United Way found enough like-minded people to form an official body.

Speciale is president of the Art Deco Society of Louisiana, one of only 16 organizations like it in the country, and only one of 25 in the world.

And the only one in Louisiana. "We are it for the state. But we have New Orleans representing us here. We have French Settlement. We have interest from the northern parts of the state but they can't make the trek down here," Speciale said.

Most of the 30 members do show up in Baton Rouge for the meetings held every other month to discuss art deco and how to preserve art deco buildings all over the country.

Art deco is an art form popular in buildings and furnishings built in America from about 1920 to 1940, Speciale said.

It is characterized by simple, straight lines, smooth surfaces, uninterrupted curves and a lack of adornment. "The old theory that less is more — simplicity tends to dominate the movement," Speciale said.

Some art deco doors and walls sport round portholes for windows, while some buildings that feature human figures show an over-emphasis on speed, Speciale said.

Builders primarily used oak, ebony, walnut and mahogany woods as well as marble, bronze, iron and aluminum.

"The stage itself is very, very classic art deco," Speciale said, bubbling with enthusiasm when talking about his passion. "It's flaring art deco. It's one of the best-kept secrets in Baton Rouge."

But Speciale's favorite art deco site in Baton Rouge is the Capitol, with its more than 30 different kinds of marble and the urns, statues and other objects brought here from France.

The building lost many of its treasures during a renovation in the 1970s, which was made necessary when a bomb exploded in the Senate chamber, Speciale said.

"That area of the building was plundered," Speciale said. "Door knobs, lighting fixtures, desks — they were stolen from the building."

Speciale's theory is that some people just couldn't resist getting their hands on the history the building represents, he said.

"A lot of people wanted a piece of it because they knew Huey Long had a hand in creating it," Speciale said. "In a strange way, it would be like going into an Egyptian pharaoh's tomb and taking something."