

XI 12 • ALEX THEATER

216 North Brand Boulevard, Glendale

Original theater attributed to Meyer and Holler, 1925; front addition attributed to Arthur G. Lindley and Charles R. Selkirk, 1939

The front part of the Alex Theater, with its undulating white-and-yellow stucco walls, its box office shaped like a three-dimensional C and its impossibly tall pylon erupting out of the center of the marquee, is a real oddity among the standard two-story storefronts of Glendale, a city devoted to conservatism. But the oddest thing about this futuristic façade, which was built in 1939 when the fever for Streamline Moderne and Buck Rogers was at its peak, is that it stands in front of an even stranger design, an exact replica of a Hellenistic movie house. The original theater, with its Greek temple lobby and its portico distyle in antis, opened in 1925, just before Sid Grauman built his famous Chinese Theater in Hollywood (page 242). Despite a thick disguise of yellow paint on the exterior, this elaborately detailed building is still intact. It is reached, as in Grauman's earlier Egyptian Theater, by an open-air walkway behind the box office. A science fiction stucco roof on rocket-launcher pipe columns now sweeps overhead, managing, at the far end, to conceal the capitals of two mammoth Doric columns that hold up the much higher coffered ceiling of the original theater's portico; but the rest of the old Greek cinema is all here. Six pairs of double glass doors, etched with floral patterns, are framed by Ionic columns and an entablature that bristles with acroteria. Inside, a large mural covers a far wall, recalling ancient Greek vase paintings. Stairs on each side lead past heroic medallions and victory-wreathed light fixtures to a many-columned balcony. Another coffered ceiling, this time painted gold, once had light bulbs in its rosettes that added a shower of glitter to the architectural odyssey below.

From across the street you can just see a stepped pyramid and large urns that rise above the old entrance of the Greekish theater, standing resolutely in the shadows of that H. G. Wells face lift. It's a little hard to put your finger on it, but there's something extremely L.A. about all of this.

