

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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No. 85
FOR RELEASE
Wednesday, December 17, 1958

Press Preview:
Tuesday, December 16, 1958
11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

For the first time in its history the Museum of Modern Art has on view an exhibition entirely devoted to the "useful objects" it has acquired for its own collection as a record of the most beautiful artifacts of the 20th century. The show, which includes more than 500 pieces of furniture, household accessories and machines designed here and abroad in the past 60 years, will be on view at the Museum, 11 West 53 Street, from December 17 through February 18.

Although the majority of the objects shown are examples of contemporary chairs, tables, lamps, glassware, silver and china, an historical section illustrates five different aspects of the background of today's modern design: Art Nouveau (1893-1910) Classical Form Restated, de Stijl (1917-28), Bauhaus (1919-33) and Machine Art.

"Twentieth Century Design from the Museum Collection" includes such diverse objects as Tiffany vases and a cast iron Paris Metro entrance gate, chairs by famous American and European architects, tools, pots and pans, typewriters and sewing machines, church vestments, X-ray tubes and control panels from an electronic computer. Objects that cost a few cents are shown as well as some which cost several hundreds to produce.

The exhibition was selected by Arthur Drexler, Director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design, and Greta Daniel, Associate Curator, from the Design Collection which has been assembled by the Museum during the past 25 years. Lack of gallery space prevents even part of it from being permanently on view and has limited this first extensive showing to about two-thirds of the total number of objects now owned by the Museum.

Objects are chosen for the Collection, Mr. Drexler points out in the main exhibition label, on the basis of quality and historical significance. An object is chosen for its quality because it is thought to be truly original, or to achieve in high degree those formal ideals of beauty which have become the major stylistic concepts of our time. Significance, he says, is a more flexible evaluation. It applies to objects not necessarily works of art but which nevertheless have contributed importantly to the development of design.

At the entrance to the exhibition galleries are 19th century Thonet bentwood chairs, shown because the process of bending solid rods of beechwood (eliminating intricate hand carved joints) was an early and important technical advance towards present day methods of producing furniture.

The first section of the exhibition is devoted to examples of the Art Nouveau

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style. A desk, umbrella stand and chairs by the French architect Guimard are shown on an elevated platform. Silver from England and Tiffany glass from the United States are among the smaller objects on view in a long silk-lined wall cabinet. This style, which flourished from about 1893 until 1910, was the first movement in the arts to break with the 19th century custom of imitating past styles. It embraced everything from poster design to architecture with forms often reminiscent of plants and flowers. The sinuous whiplash curve became Art Nouveau's typical contour and straight lines were avoided even in objects that would normally require them.

Grouped under the heading "Classical Form Restated" are examples of the pure classical shapes of Wedgwood and Baccarat which have continued to satisfy 20th century judgement, along with vases and glasses by Hoffmann, who although a foremost member of the Art Nouveau in Austria, was at times greatly influenced by classical forms.

Two chairs and a lamp by Gerritt Rietveld illustrate the contributions to modern design made by members of the de Stijl group. This movement was initiated by Dutch painters during World War I and existed as an organized movement until 1928. Like Art Nouveau de Stijl developed unifying concepts affecting all the arts. But while Art Nouveau was richly curvilinear and dependent on organic forms, de Stijl designers and architects reduced the elements of composition to independent rectangular forms, replaced traditional symmetry with freely asymmetrical balance and used clear, flat primary colors.

The Bauhaus School, an important design center in Germany from 1919 to 1933, is represented by chairs by Breuer, Mies van der Rohe and Corbusier placed on enormous pedestals. "Bauhaus designers," Mr. Drexler says, "were far more preoccupied with problems of function than were de Stijl artists, but their functional solutions were expressed in geometric forms influenced by de Stijl concepts." Among characteristic Bauhaus ideas illustrated in the show are the use of light metal tubes in the design of furniture, and highly polished surfaces relieved occasionally by textures rather than by ornament.

Most of the objects shown under the heading of Machine Art were first exhibited at the Museum in 1934 in a show called "Machine Art." These include laboratory glass, coil springs, propellers and ball bearings as well as objects made primarily for decorative purposes such as vases, ashtrays and bowls. They are shown on a tall circular pedestal. "The precise geometric shapes of seemingly undesignated machines and hand tools became, in the 1920s," Mr. Drexler says, "a matter of conscious aesthetic preference. Painters, sculptors, architects and even craftsmen were influenced by these pure forms."

About two-thirds of the exhibition is devoted to products designed here and abroad during the past two decades, most of which are available on the consumer

market. As the chair has offered the 20th century furniture designer his greatest opportunity, according to Mr. Drexler, this section of the exhibition includes 22 chairs by Eames, Saarinen, Bertola, Wegner, Mathsson, Aalto, Breuer, Komai and Wright, ranged along a long gallery wall. Two tables and various kinds of lamps are also shown here.

The chairs illustrate the two basic approaches to chair design described by Mr. Drexler in the wall label. The first is the traditional method of shaping individual pieces and then joining them in various ways. The second is the direct outgrowth of new techniques and materials which make it possible to form plywood or plastic into a seat in much the same way an automobile body is stamped out by a die press.

Typewriters, a sewing machine, radios, and a flashlight are among the objects shown in the section of the exhibition headed Industrial Design. Mr. Drexler points out that as mechanical appliances have become more complex in this century, and as the difficulties of moving, storing and repairing them multiply, an important problem the designer must solve is how to protect them. What we see today of most of our mechanical appliances is a shell or package and for this reason during the last decade many objects of different uses have begun to resemble each other, he says.

In a long glass-walled arcade a large selection of vases, bowls, glassware, plastic boxes, silverware and similar objects are shown under the general heading of Useful Objects. In this section of the exhibition, Mr. Drexler points out that while the geometric Machine Art style of the 20s and early 30s tended to impose pure form on all manner of objects, in the early 30s this style began to evolve toward a freer use of compound curves and sculptural shapes. In their most recent Scandinavian and Italian manifestations, he says, these shapes call to mind the earlier organic forms of Art Nouveau, but they seldom depart completely from the basic discipline of geometry.

Tubes for X-Ray and TV equipment, printed circuits used in electronic computers, two relay panels and a control panel for a Ramac IEM computer are shown in the final gallery of the exhibition. Here also are two silk chasubles designed by Matisse for the Vence Chapel and a tapestry by Anni Albers showing a gold cross on a blue and tan background.

Just as the earlier geometric machine forms contributed to the vocabulary of modern design, Mr. Drexler says, the non-geometric patterns of today's electronic equipment may contribute to a new design vocabulary. The computing machines record a process (the movement of energy) either on a printed sheet or in a three-dimensional form. The obvious physical resemblance of these patterns to action painting is less interesting than the underlying parallel in thought and ideas which appears to
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preoccupy both scientists and artists today.

The Design Collection is part of the Museum Collection which is under the direction of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Greta Daniel, Associate Curator, has been responsible for 14 years for assembling material for submission to the Museum Committee on Collections, which passes on all acquisitions, including paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, films and photographs. Miss Daniel has traveled in the United States and Europe in search of material and is the author of the Museum's Teaching Portfolio on Design. Miss Daniel and Mr. Drexler, Director of the Department of Architecture and Design, are co-authors of the forthcoming "Introduction to 20th Century Design" to be published by the Museum in January.

Checklist, photographs, additional material available on request from Elizabeth Shaw, Publicity Director, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York 19, CI 5-8900.