BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

What follows is a selection of blog posts written over a period of three years beginning in June, 2008 on topics ranging from the Grinch to prefabricated housing. I had been commissioned by Cindy Allen, editor-in-chief of Interior Design Magazine, to produce a weekly post corresponding roughly to the world of modern design, which as a modern design gallerist and consultant, I was assumed to possess insider knowledge about. In my original introduction, I asked the reader to consider me as a tour guide on a bus traveling a really interesting road, yet without a road map.

Some weeks, I dashed off brief topical meditations, often right at my deadline; other weeks I spent considerable amounts of time and effort (including way too many all-nighters) researching and writing, and finding images for, more substantial considerations of often under-appreciated or lesser-known designers or design topics.

Along the way, I wrote about Moby Dick, Mon Oncle, Jan de Swart, Ruth Asawa (pre Christie's and David Zwirner), circles, Arthur Carrara, Roosevelt Island, Philip Johnson's Glass House, the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows (spoiler alert: I was there); Henry Glass, Lina Bo Bardi, Sam Maloof (a requiem), the Yves Saint Laurent auction, Wingate Paine, Robert Loughlin, Box Furniture, Patrick Jouin, the Jetsons, Leslie Larsen, Eero Saarinen, Mexican Modernism, Goldfinger (not that one), the Eames auction, Illums Bolighus, Gordon Drake, Carl Koch, Richard Filipowski, Isamu Noguchi, Edward Wormley, Christopher Dresser, George Hunziger, Fran Hosken, and Braun, among others.

Ultimately, the only connective tissue was my own interest and curiosity, honed through two decades of direct experiences–as a graduate student in the History of Technology, a seven-fold museum intern, an owner of a SoHo gallery specializing in vintage modern design, and an inveterate bibliophile. I felt fortunate, I wrote, to have built a career in a field that is filled with strong personalities, fabulous objects, and pertinent issues; a field that is colorful, provocative, and inspiring. So, without further ado, except for the disclaimer that the following posts have profited from some minor retroactive editing, I present *Weinblog*.

The Wire Sculpture of Ruth Asawa

July 9, 2009

Larry Weinberg

Until recently, Ruth Asawa was an under-appreciated artist whose work in looped wire mesh began after WWII ended. Partly, this was due to art criticism at the time, which attempted to pigeonhole her work as craft-based and feminine, not an odious description in a general way, but dismissive in the rarified circles of avant-garde art. A retrospective exhibition in 2007, and the accompanying catalog titled “The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air,” should help relocate Asawa as an important figure in post-war American art.

This is not to say that Asawa was unknown. Her work graced the covers of *Arts and Architecture* in 1952, and the “lxii American Exhibition”at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1957. She had her first one-person show in Cambridge in 1953, and was the subject of an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1973. Still, her career was due for re-evaluation. Interestingly, the same critic who, writing in 1955, deemed Asawa’s wire crochet technique to be offensively repetitious and mechanical went on to link her work to the heightened awareness of space and movement emblematic of Constructivism. “Miss Asawa’s sculpture,” he wrote, “meets these intangible criteria with an elegance appropriate to the austere architecture of the mid-century’s International Style.” This reference to architecture is apt: Asawa’s volumetric designs share a dialogue with

modern architecture's concerns with space, proportion, transparency, and lightness.

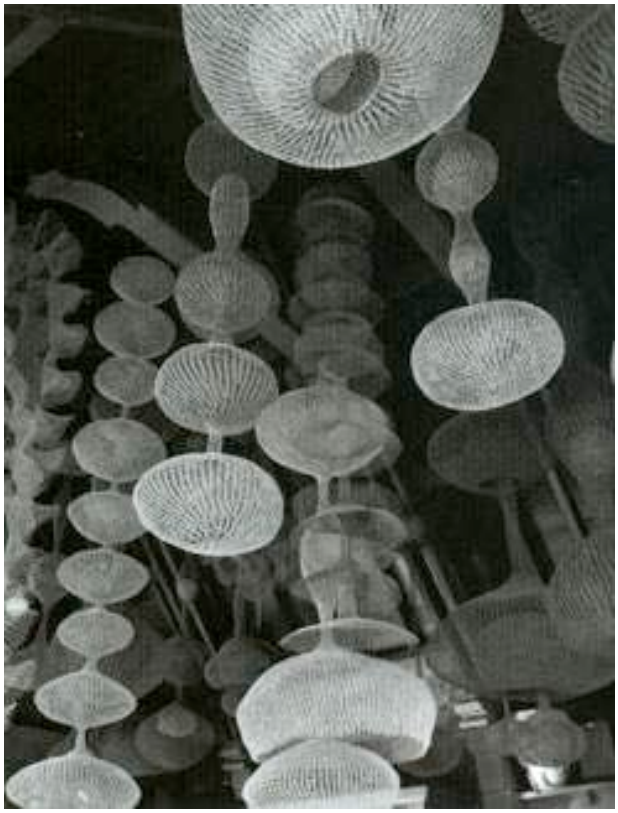
Ruth Asawa was born in 1926 in California. As a Japanese-American, she was interned for a period of time during WWII, but after the war she secured a place as a student at prestigious Black Mountain College in North Carolina. There, she learned lessons of economy and ecology from Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller. She learned to see art as an ongoing process of exploration and experimentation, and to see art education as an integral part of life. She emerged with a sense of herself as an artist and a citizen, connected to her Zen roots and to the broader American culture.

Asawa began to crochet wire-mesh structures in 1948. The symmetrical structures themselves were intellectually rigorous, requiring discipline and technical precision. The resulting constructs were ethereal, fanciful, and vital. They were complex, varying, three-dimensional explorations of lines in space. They were perceived as organic, related to fruit, gourds, and plants. Or perhaps aquatic life, like sea anemones or compound jellyfish. The form-within-forms also seem to contain a generative principle, pregnant with new ideas.

The essence of Asawa's art in wire has to do with transparency and interpenetration, with overlapping, shadow, and darkening. Her forms appear simultaneously inside and outside, sometimes revealing their inner space, sometimes their outer. This shifting perspective makes the forms dynamic, and gives them a quality of vision-in-motion. Hanging individual works in series adds further layers of complexity, as the overlapping compositions become artworks themselves, which change as the viewer changes position.

The repetitive, mechanical aspect of

Asawa's technique may have troubled critics, conjuring baskets and fish traps, but I would argue that her art occurred precisely at the intersection of the mechanical and the organic, and so addressed a central problem of early postwar modernism. Rumpelstiltskin-like, Asawa spun living forms out of base materials. She transformed a mechanical process into a richly organic oeuvre, echoing and marking the process of cultural rebuilding and renewal that followed the Machine Age and WWII.



Ruth Asawa raised six children while working out of a studio at home. This lack of separation between art and life was intentional, and reflected Black Mountain ideals. In a profound way, Asawa's interior and exterior life was as seamlessly interwoven as her wire sculptures.

All images from "The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air" (University of California Press, 2007).

Gorgeous George: George Hunzinger Furniture

December 18, 2008

Larry Weinberg

That George Hunzinger (1835-98) is not a household name like Michael Thonet or even Charles Eames, owes as much to the vagaries of fashion as to any shortcomings on Hunzinger's part. A German immigrant from a family of cabinet-makers, Hunzinger was a Victorian-era inventor (he held 21 patents) and designer whose commercially successful body of work embraced machine production methods and materials. Regarded by historians and critics as a proto-modernist, Hunzinger was the subject of a retrospective exhibition "The Furniture of George Hunzinger: Invention and Innovation in Nineteenth-Century America" held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1997. In a review of this exhibition, Roberta Smith of the New York Times lauded Hunzinger's most innovative and forward-looking chairs for their transparency and structural rigor, and for offering an early glimmer of modernism's emphasis on abstraction and visual austerity. The exhibition, she wrote, "showed furniture shedding its Victorian padding like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis."

Despite praise like this from a high priestess of design criticism, Hunzinger's work continues to languish in the market–examples of his work sell for as little as a few hundred dollars on e-bay–and his name remains

relatively obscure even in design circles. Surely, much of this is due to modernism's aversion to things Victorian, and to Hunzinger's own entrepreneurial savvy, which resulted in a large number of utterly conventional Hunzinger designs–clunky and overly-decorated, they are rightly consigned to the dustbin of history. Even many of Hunzinger's progressive designs do not escape the trappings of historicism and revivalism, and so look to us more like caterpillars than butterflies. It takes a closer examination to detect the underlying modernity. Left are a handful of stripped-down designs that feature Hunzinger innovations such as cantilevered frames and wire-mesh seats and backs, along with machine-inspired, lathe-turned decorative elements. Spare and abstractly beautiful, these designs rise above Victorian meretriciousness and clutter like the aforementioned butterfly. I cannot explain why they are not as much a part of the modernist canon–

and the modern design market–as Christopher Dresser's metalwork, E.L. Godwin's Japonesque sideboards, or Michael Thonet's bentwood chairs.

A look at a few actual Hunzinger pieces should be instructive. The chair with the spiral lathe-turned frame and caramel colored seat looks, at a glance, like a conventional Jacobean-revival design. A second look at the frame–a turn of the screw–reveals that the spiral elements also resemble a drill bit or machine part, and this reveals a deeper dialogue about the role of ornament in a

machine age. More forward-looking is the suspended seat and back, which look–and float–like a mid 20th-century design. The armchair with the neo-classical pediment and Ottoman arches contains a mélange of motifs, per Victorian praxis, yet the whole is harmoniously and artfully balanced, and pulled together by the patented wire-mesh seat and back, which gives the work an architectural unity and bearing. This chair not only anticipates Carlo Bugatti's historicist work of the 1920's, but with its historical references and wire grid is curiously proto post-modernist, though without the irony or quotation marks.

It is fitting to end with a look at the two most stripped-down chair designs, which appear the most modern to our eyes. Both of these chairs have the wire-mesh seat Hunzinger innovated in the 1870's. This feature in one stroke eliminated the clutter and heaviness of the spring-batting-and-draped fabric typical of Victorian upholstered furniture, and did so using materials and methods suitable to the machine. This experiment with wire mesh pre-figured the wire-mesh chair designs of Bertoia and Eames in 1951. Both chairs also have cantilevered seats and transparent structure. Both have reticulated turned elements that resemble bamboo, a Japanese inspiration. The chair with the asymmetrical back is particularly Japonesque, locating Hunzinger in a vanguard with Dresser, Godwin, and Frank Lloyd Wright in recognizing and incorporating this powerful modernist influence.

Prefab Housing...Then
September 18, 2008

Larry Weinberg

When Carl Koch wrote *At Home With Tomorrow* (1958), his paean to prefabrication in housing, he was mining a skein of modernist thought with roots back to the 19th century. More importantly, as the title suggests, he was advocating an idea that was gaining momentum and familiarity in postwar America. That idea—modular, configurable housing produced through industrial mass-production methods—was shared and promoted by progressive architects and thinkers such as Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Buckminster Fuller. With a boost from wartime technologies, and visual exposure to the ubiquitous military Quonset hut, the time seemed ripe to advance what had been perceived as a visionary goal, vaguely utopian, often less vaguely futuristic, and by 1956 there were some 225 different pre-fab house projects on the market. Koch himself was involved in two notable efforts—the Lustron house, an early postwar attempt at an all-steel modular dwelling—and the TechBuilt house, which premiered in 1953. The Lustron project began auspiciously, with backing from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, but ended dismally in pre-production, with a taxpayer loss in excess of 30

Lustron house, exterior and interior, circa 1950.

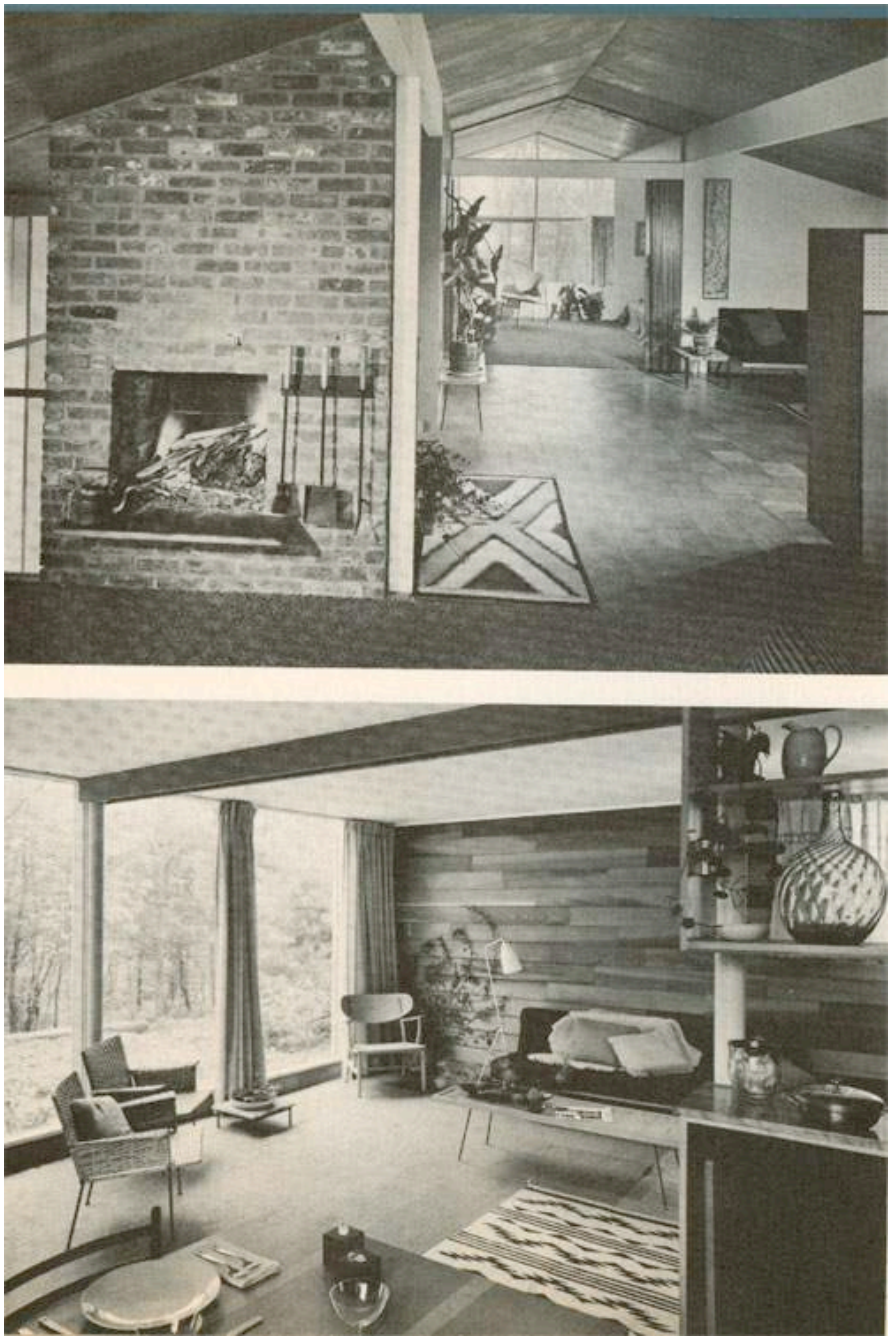
million dollars. Koch was merely a design consultant on the project—he pinned the failure on bureaucratic scale and bad timing.

TechBuilt house, circa 1953.

The TechBuilt house was Koch's own project, and was, in his own words, an unexpected success, in terms of sales if not in terms of profitability. By 1956, when his book was being written, sales had reached 2.4 million dollars (upwards of 400 or so units). Koch attributed the appeal of the house to the use of traditional materials (wood) and traditional, regional architectural elements (A-frame roof, saltbox shape). Koch was clearly on to something here—his TechBuilt designs (there were eventually seven different models) mitigated the perception that pre-fab houses were too mechanical-looking and regimented. Optimistic that prefabrication was the wave of the future for the housing industry, Koch proclaimed in his book that "the industry is on sound footing, with necessity behind it." He may have been right, but he was off by at least fifty years. By the early 1960's, the post-war flirtation with prefabrication had ended, and the business of housing

TechBuilt house, second view.

construction in America returned to "hammer and handsaw," to custom building. Progressive thinking about prefabrication passed to England, Japan, and Finland. Only recently, with a groundswell of interest in green design, has a rationale for prefabrication re-emerged in the American market, reflected in a growing range of options from an increasing number of architectural firms.



Interior views of the TechBuilt house.

Wingate Paine in New York

December 11, 2008

Larry Weinberg

My first exposure to the photography of Wingate Paine occurred about 10 years ago when a portfolio of his work turned up in a gallery on Lafayette Street in Manhattan. As I sifted through hundreds of unframed images, I learned that the then-obscure Paine had been a leading fashion and advertising photographer in the early 1960's who quit that scene to do a homage to womanhood. The work I was looking at was erotically charged and cinematic: think *Mad Men* meets *Blow-Up*.

What caught my attention was the mood—the images channeled Mary Quant's London, though Paine was as American as Ansel Adams. Of course, it didn't hurt that the women were stunningly beautiful, and often more naked than not.

Paine himself had an unusual and varied career trajectory. Born in 1915 into a Boston Brahmin family—namesake of a Founding Father—he eschewed his hereditary connections in banking and law to become first a Marine captain, then by turns a yoga devotee, wine connoisseur, photographer, filmmaker, and later a sculptor and Buddhist teacher and writer. After a long period of neglect, Paine's stock has been rising in recent years. His work has been turning up at auctions such as Swann's, Wright, and Rago, and has been shown in galleries in New York and Los Angeles. Tonight, the first solo exhibition of his photographs opens at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York City. Running through January 17, the show features over 75 vintage prints from Paine's personal archive, drawn primarily from his 1966 book *Mirror of Venus*. Co-written by Francoise Sagan and Federico Fellini, *Mirror of Venus* has been reprinted 10 times in four languages. Paine's

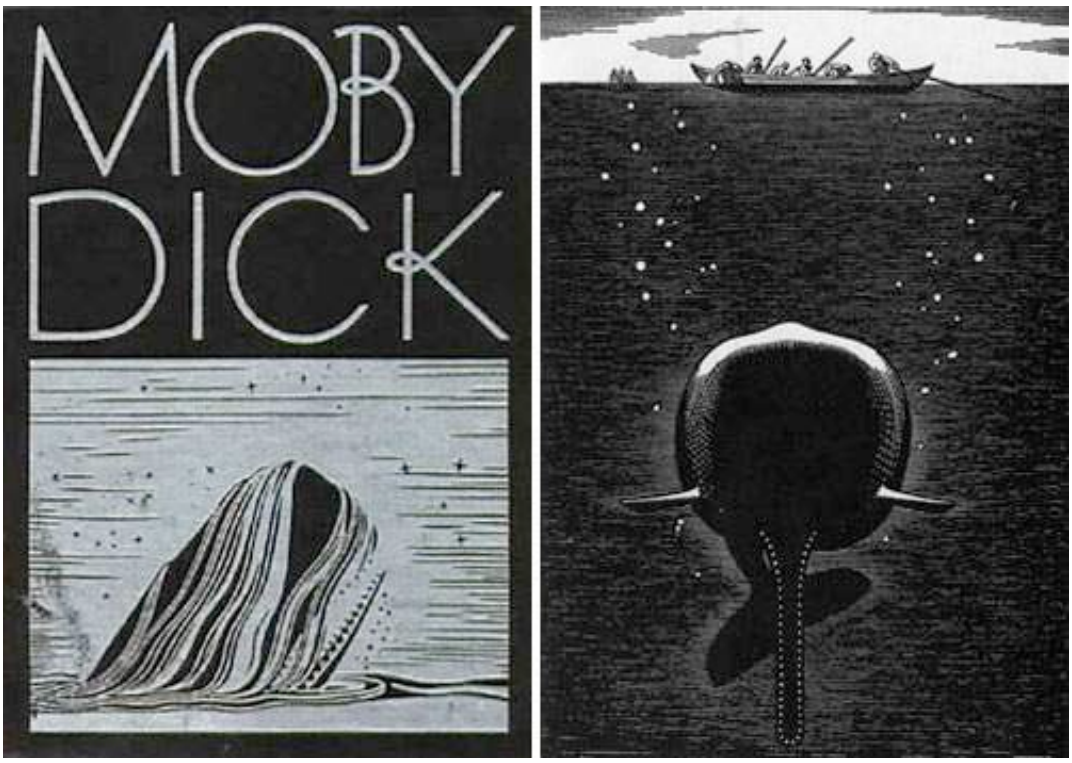
photographs of three models/muses provide vicarious pleasures, if not titillation. Tame by today's standards, the book pushed boundaries in its day. Though tinged for us with 60's nostalgia, the images remain visually fresh, if only because the decade keeps cycling back into fashion. The text, unfortunately, seems dated to our post-feminist sensibilities.

Witness Francoise Sagan: "*For a woman the time/is often the time./After the time,/it is sometimes the time;/but before the time, it is never the time.*" I know I don't understand women; I certainly don't understand Francoise Sagan. At least Fellini is more straightforward: "*Why can't we always live in a house full of women like this(?)*" Why indeed. For an experience that is highly evocative and a bit provocative, try the book, or better yet, see the exhibition.

When Herman Met Rockwell: The Definitive Moby-Dick

August 6, 2009

Larry Weinberg



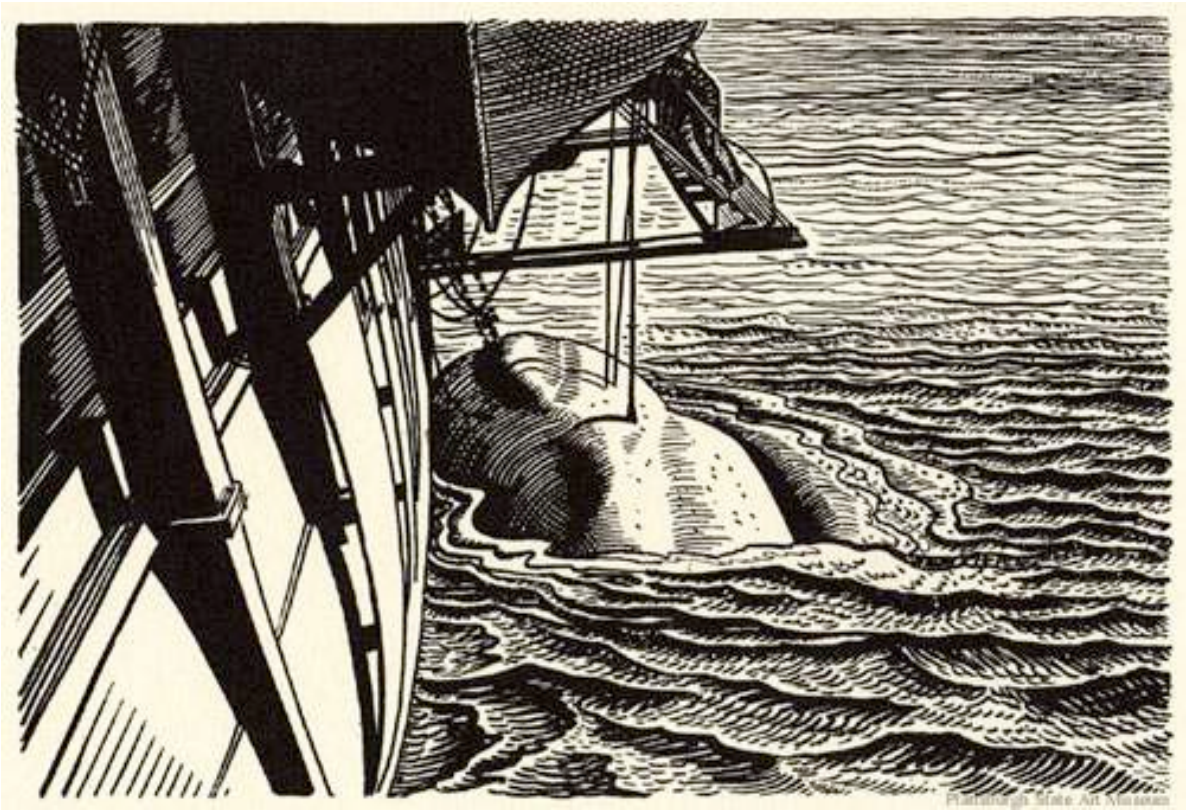
“Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet…then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.”

So begins “Moby Dick”—first paragraph, anyway—the man meets fish (well, aquatic mammal) epic penned by Herman Melville in 1851. Immortal words now, but for a period of time prior to 1920, largely forgotten ones, along, not incidentally, with the words and works of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Reassessment and rediscovery began in the early 1920’s, partly through the efforts of critics such as Lewis Mumford (“The Golden Day,” 1926, and “Herman Melville,” 1929), and Carl Van Doren (“The American Novel,” 1921). Interestingly, and again not incidentally, the same wave that brought Melville, Whitman, and Thoreau back into view also re-introduced Richardson, Sullivan, and Wright (Mumford, The Brown Decades, 1931).

But the biggest boost to Melville's reputation came from Rockwell Kent, with the publication in 1930 of the 3-volume Lakeside Press edition of Moby Dick, illustrated and designed by Kent. Both the limited edition (1000 copies) and the Random House trade edition, also published in 1930, sold extremely well, helping push Melville back into the public consciousness. Melville was overdue, no doubt, but this was clearly a Reese's peanut butter cup moment, a happy marriage of writer and illustrator. Indeed, it would be hard to find a writer-illustrator combination as well-matched, unless maybe it is Hunter Thompson and Ralph Steadman, though Kent and Melville didn't work together, and surely didn't party together (Kent was 9 when Melville died in 1891).

That Melville and Kent were kindred spirits is evident in their biographies and their paths, which crossed literally and metaphorically. Both men spent significant portions of their lives in and around New York and the mountains north and west of the city. Melville was of the generation of romantic writers and thinkers that included Emerson and Thoreau; he was also a sailor and an adventurer—his first three novels,

“Typee,” “Omoo,” and “Mardi,” recount his travels to exotic lands. Kent was weaned on mysticism and transcendentalism, reading Emerson and Whitman extensively (he also



illustrated Leaves of Grass). He, too, was an adventurer and fellow traveler (in more ways than one: Kent received the Lenin Peace Prize in 1967). Kent’s early books include “Voyaging Southward from the Strait of Magellan” and “N by E,” recounting sailing adventures to Tierra del Fuego and Greenland. Additionally, Melville’s scathing indictment of commerce and materialism in “The Confidence Man” is echoed in Kent’s embracing of socialism.

So when Kent was approached in 1926 with an offer to illustrate Dana's "Two Years Before the Mast," he suggested “Moby Dick” instead, and the rest is publishing history.

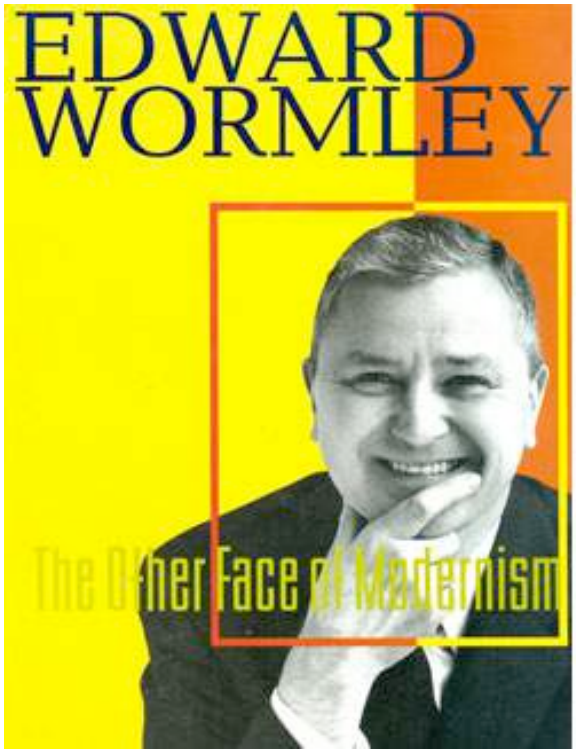
Since 1930, Melville's—and the book's—place in the pantheon of literature has remained secure (Starbuck's, anyone?), while Kent's artistic reputation has largely waned in the face of abstract expressionism and successive art movements. But the illustrated “Moby Dick” has remained in print for 75 years, thrilling generations of readers with Melville's incandescent prose and Kent's dramatic and haunting engravings.

Illustrations from "Moby Dick" illustrated by Rockwell Kent; courtesy of Plattsburgh State University.

Larry Weinberg

Edward Wormley: Pictures from an Exhibition

September 3, 2009



I'm finding it hard to believe it's been 12 years since Lin-Weinberg presented its groundbreaking Wormley exhibition, and published the accompanying catalog, "Edward Wormley: The Other Face of Modernism." While we could not take credit for discovering Wormley—he had remained on the radar, though his fortunes had slipped—we did help nudge him back toward the center of the modern design map.

Four years later, in the aftermath of 9/11, we revisited Wormley with an installation at Sanford Smith's Modernism + Art20 show. Here, we attempted to create an interior that would merit Wormley's approval. The work helped us put one foot in front of another through a very difficult period, and the results seemed to be appreciated by a shell-shocked design community. Here is what I wrote at the time:

“It has been four years since Lin-Weinberg presented [its] retrospective exhibition [on Wormley]. In this period, there has been a resurgence of interest in Wormley’s furniture designs, from icons such as the ‘Listen-to-Me’ chaise to unassuming side tables and benches. And this is justly so. Wormley possessed a keen eye for style and proportion, an ability to work both with fine materials and industrial techniques, and a commitment to comfort and flexibility. His best designs rank with the best designs of the period, either for usefulness and economic value, or for sheer exuberance and imagination.

Yet, Wormley’s rediscovered stature as a furniture designer should not obscure his talent and significance as an interior designer. From 1944 on, Wormley kept an office in New York City from which he took on residential commission work. He also designed the interiors for Dunbar showrooms, installations, and catalog layouts. Critics praised Dunbar showrooms for their aplomb and virtuosity, for adaptability, unerring taste, and sound, unpretentious good sense. A Wormley interior incorporated a broad range of influences, ranging freely across geography and time, drawing inspiration from East and West, past and present. Finishing touches included Moroccan rugs, modern paintings, and African

sculpture. Wormley once called himself a middle ground designer, and indeed his work occupies an interior middle landscape, mediating between the agenda of the International Style and the often competing claims of tradition and craftsmanship. Wormley's brand of modernism allowed for familiarity, memory, and personality. His interiors were templates for self-expression, balancing accent pieces for drama and excitement with an underlying architectural sensibility that favored clean lines and simple elegance.

More than as a designer of individual pieces of furniture, Wormley should be remembered for the living spaces he created. As an interior designer, Wormley anticipated a multitude of needs and built interiors "for the comfort, dignity, and sense of security of human beings." (John Anderson, *Playboy*, 1961) Wormley's aesthetic vision reached its fullest expression in his interiors. His was an art of assemblage, of juxtaposition and composition, whether of elements within a piece or of pieces within a setting. Our installation seeks to showcase Wormley's ability to blend old and new, luxurious and simple, into a practical, harmonious, and dynamic modernist interior."

Today, Wormley is recognized as the modern American master he was. His pieces sell at top galleries and auction houses, and are placed into projects by leading interior designers. Dunbar has even been revived, and is reproducing some of Wormley's designs. Last year, Todd Merrill included a chapter on Wormley in his survey of American studio furniture, "Modern Americana: Studio Furniture from High Craft to High Glam." And few people are asking, as they were at the exhibition opening in 1997, "Who is Wormley?"

The Lives They Lived: Fran Hosken

December 30, 2008

Larry Weinberg

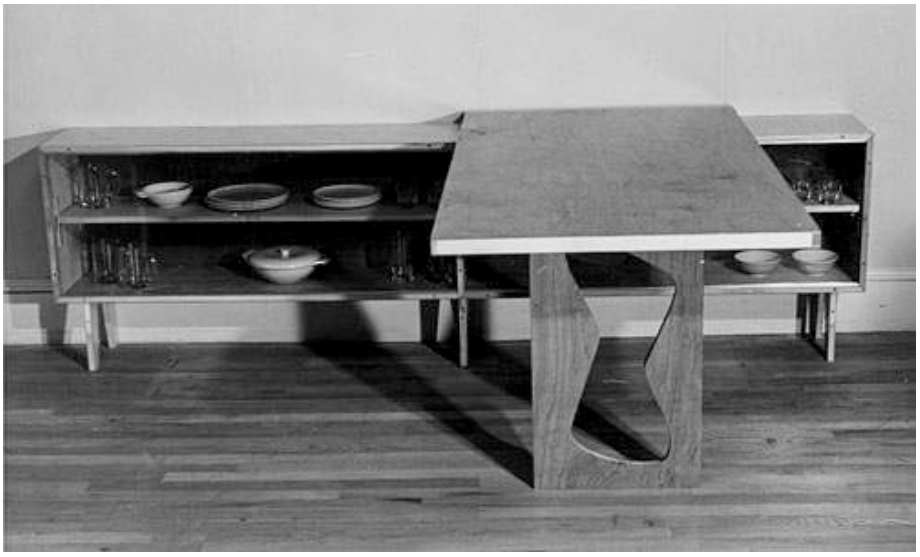
To be a designer in mid-century America was to be part of a club of like-minded individuals, widely literate, socially concerned, and avowedly activist. Trained at places like Cranbrook, the New Bauhaus, and the Harvard Graduate School of Design, a young generation of designers shared with their teachers a sense of responsibility and efficacy. Boundaries were fluid, so that furniture or industrial designers also engaged matters of architecture, landscape design, community planning, and urban renewal. As fully-rounded citizens, designers were above all cultural participants, with a level of commitment and dedication we today can only acknowledge and admire.

Untiled oil on canvas, 1972.

Franziskas Porges Hosken (1918-2006) was born into a prominent Jewish family in Vienna and immigrated to the United States in 1938. She graduated from Smith College in 1940 and moved to Boston to study architecture and design. One of the first female students admitted to the Harvard School of Design, she earned her Masters in Architecture in 1944. At Harvard, Fran learned Bauhaus ideas and methods from Gropius and Breuer, and Kepes and Moholy-Nagy. While a graduate student, she designed

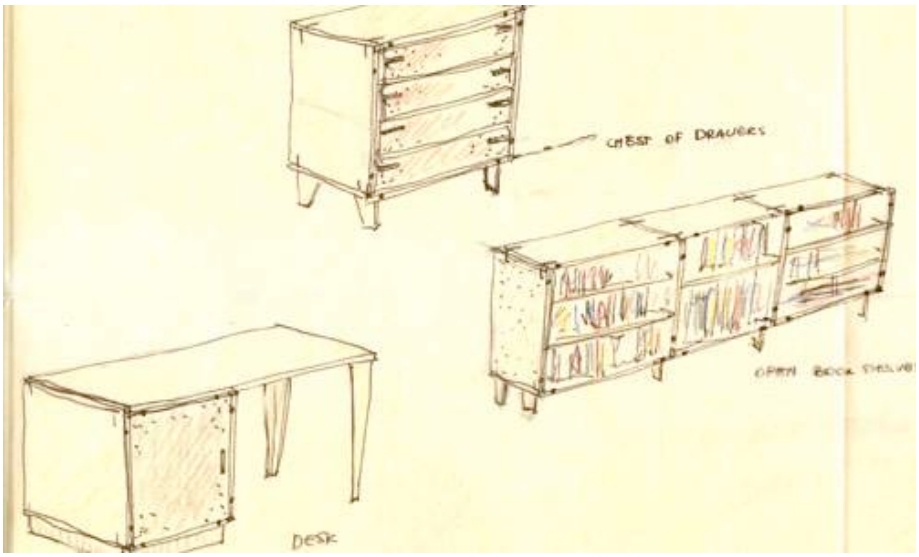
Nesting tables, c. 1948

and built a flip-down dining set for her own use, a design that would later be featured in a prestigious international design review. Fran began designing furniture for the market in 1947, and along with her husband, James Hosken, founded Hosken, Inc. later that year. One of her first projects, a stacking stool, became a commercial and critical success. More acclaim would follow. Over the next few



Prototype case piece, c. 1948; from the collection of Fran Hosken.

years, their work was published in *Furniture Forum*, *The Everyday Art Quarterly*, *Arredimento Moderno*, *House and Garden*, and *The New York Times*. It was distributed by Knoll, Raymor, and Macy's, and was shown at the Chicago Merchandise Mart (including a MOMA Good Design selection in 1951) and the Milan Triennale. Despite this promising start, the business foundered in 1951 when Fran had her first child and a deal for a factory space fell through.



Sketches for unit cases, c. 1948.

Writing about her own career for a retrospective at the Lin-Weinberg Gallery in 2001, Fran noted that "Hosken, Inc. was a good idea; the time was right, but we had no capital and no investors to back us

up and too little business experience." She went on to observe: "Now some 50 years later the very concept of what was called 'modern' by a new generation of architects has vanished especially in housing and furniture. The great wave of enthusiasm for 'new design,' starting with a new social concept of housing and 'form follows function'…is gone and has vanished, which I deeply regret. The design and social ideas which I still believe in and which I then thought would sustain the production of simple, demountable, and affordable new furniture…for young families are dead and gone."

Serving cart, c. 1949.

Fortunately for posterity, Fran was anything but a pessimist, and with the closing of one door, many other doors opened. During a long and varied career, Fran defied conventions and forged a path of her own choosing. She was a pioneering architectural photographer and archivist (the bulk of her collection is now at Texas A&M University). She was a journalist and teacher on matters of design and architecture. She published books about urban planning, notably *The Language of Cities* (1968). She traveled extensively, particularly to Africa and Afghanistan, and gained first-hand knowledge about women's issues in Third World countries. Not one to be limited in her own options, she became active in feminist causes beginning in the 1970's, serving on the boards of numerous organizations, and founding WIN, the Women's International

Network, a pre-internet means of connecting women and issues globally. She published and distributed a feminist newsletter out of her own house until well into her eighties. And she took up painting in her fifties, becoming a fairly accomplished artist.

I came to know and admire Fran while planning an exhibition of designs and design prototypes from her own collection. Fran was flattered by the belated attention to this part of her career, but it quickly became apparent that the furniture and jewelry that so interested me was but a footnote to Fran. Fran wrote me in April 2001 that she would try to attend the opening of her exhibition–we were providing transportation and accommodations–if she finished publishing the current edition of WIN NEWS in time. This was humbling to me, but demonstrated Fran's focus and fierce dedication to issues that mattered to her. As her daughter-in-law eulogized, "She felt that unless you were doing something for the world, you were useless." With Fran's passing in 2006, the world of design–and the world at large–lost a passionate and tireless advocate.

Fran Hosken wearing her coil jewelry, c. 1950

Modern Spanish Furniture

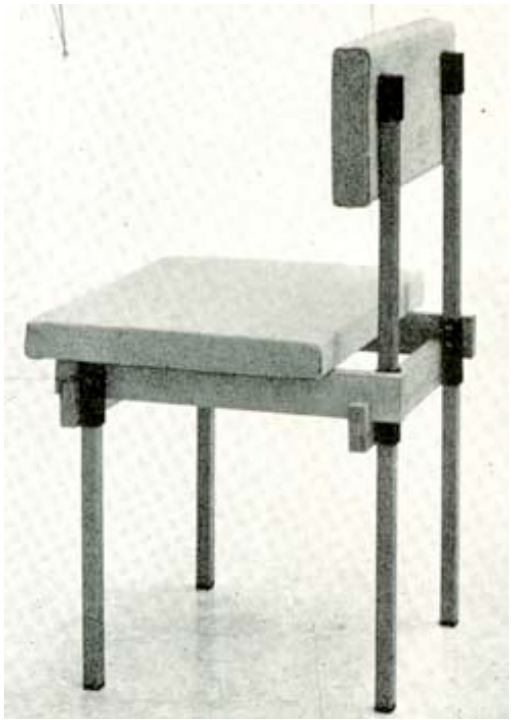
September 17, 2009

Larry Weinberg

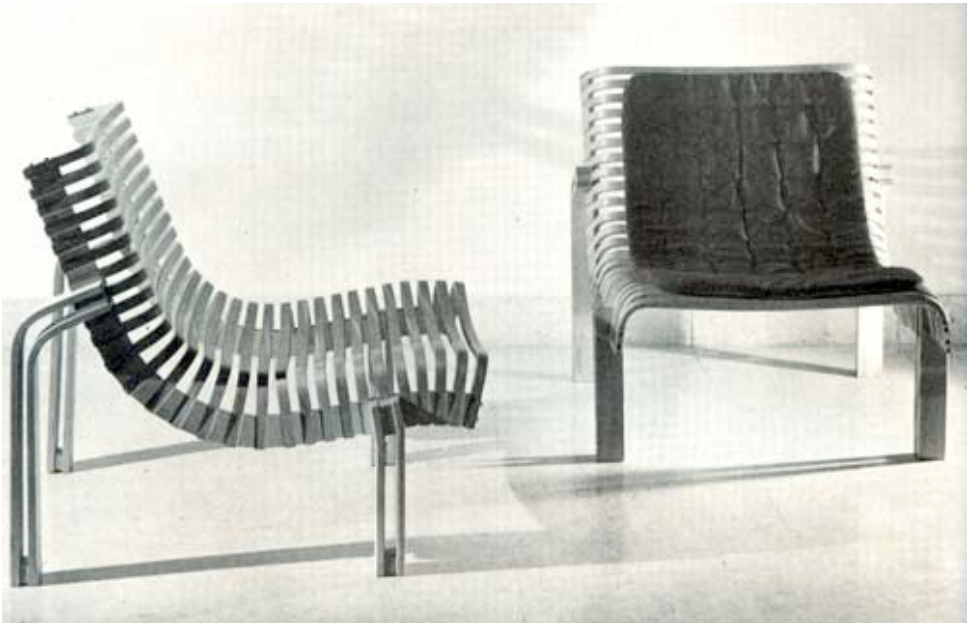
When you think of Spain, mid-century design is not the first thing that comes to mind… or the second…or third. In fact, you would be hard-pressed to name a single Spanish designer or architect working after Gaudi, except for Jose Luis Sert, who left Spain for America in 1938. I'm not sure why this is, but two possibilities suggest themselves.

First, Spanish modernism simply languished after WWII. Second, post-war Spanish modernism is out there to be rediscovered. Given the virtual absence of Spanish sources in the major design yearbooks of the mid-century—Arredimento Moderno, Studio Yearbook, New Furniture—and the presence of Latin American architects and designers such as Niemeyer, Tenreiro, and Rodrigues—it is tempting to conclude that less modernist work was produced in the mid-century in Spain than elsewhere, and what there was flew under the radar to begin with an exhibition held at The Met a few

years ago, “Barcelona and Modernity: from Gaudi to Dali,” tracked Spanish art, architecture, and design in the first three decades of the twentieth century, from the glory of Gaudi to the reaction against the perceived excesses of Art Nouveau. By the 1920’s this reaction took two forms: a revival of interest in tradition in architecture and handicraft, and the emergence of a school of minimalist rationalism that became the Spanish arm of CIAM and that culminated in the Barcelona Exhibition of 1929, with the famous Mies Pavilion and the Barcelona chair. After 1930, it seems that much of the story simply remains to be told. The strong impulses in Spain toward tradition and minimalism, coupled with Catholicism and fascism, may not have been conducive to the exuberant brand of mid-century modernism of

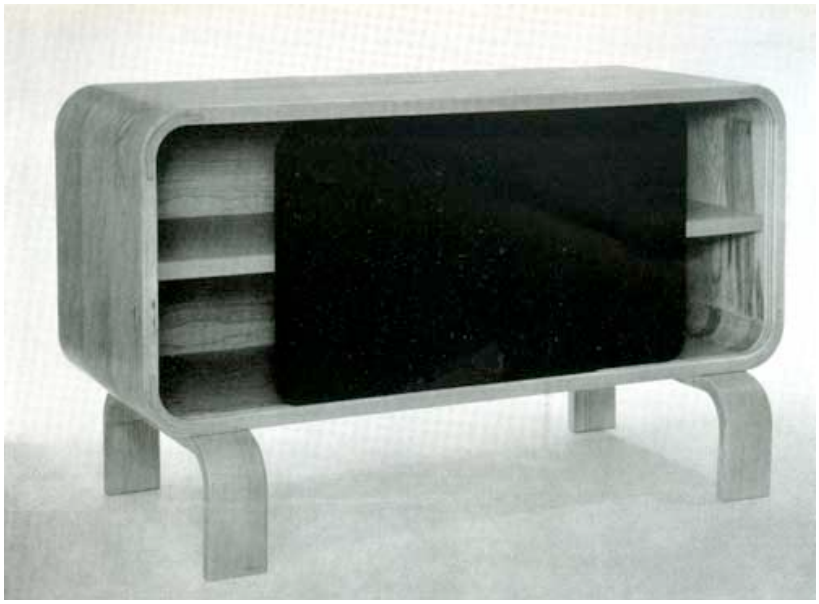


Eames, Molina, and Finn Juhl, but they were not necessarily inimical either. Too, the Spanish mission style, transplanted to California, was one of the progenitors of 20th-century design. Sooner or later, we would expect to find Spanish modern design, whether pan-European or regional and idiomatic. The question is, where?

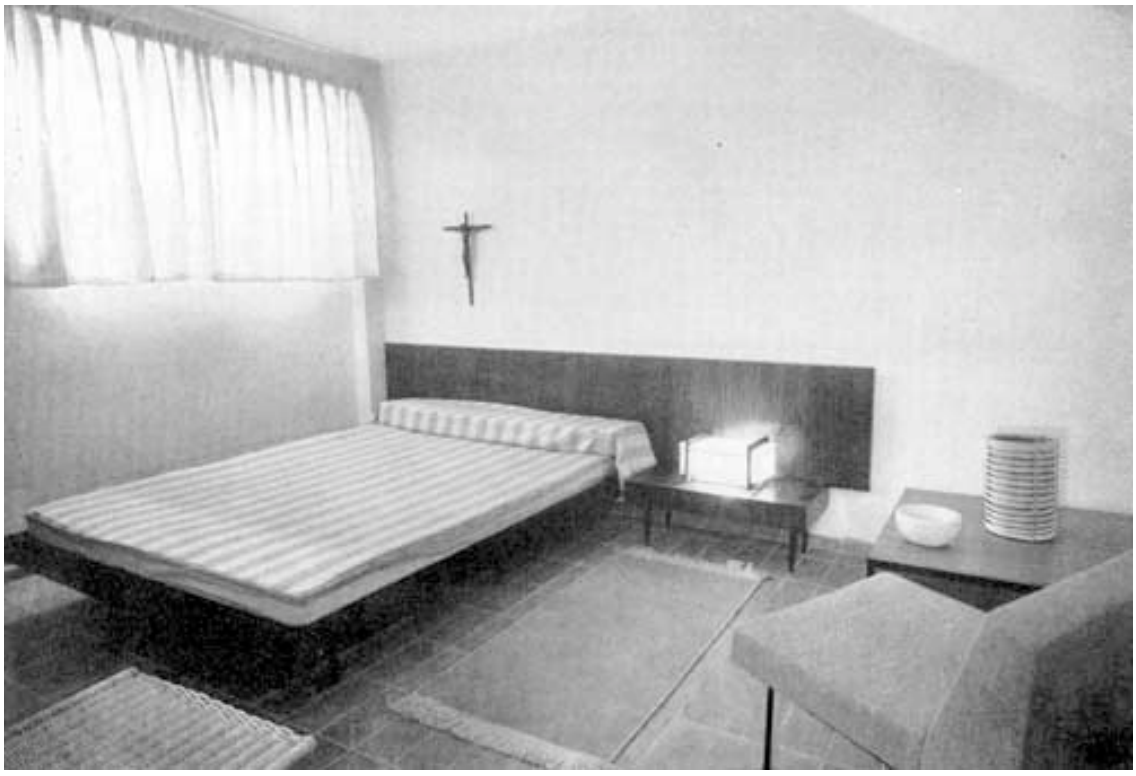


One answer is in the pages of "Arquitectura Interior," a yearbook of design published in Madrid and

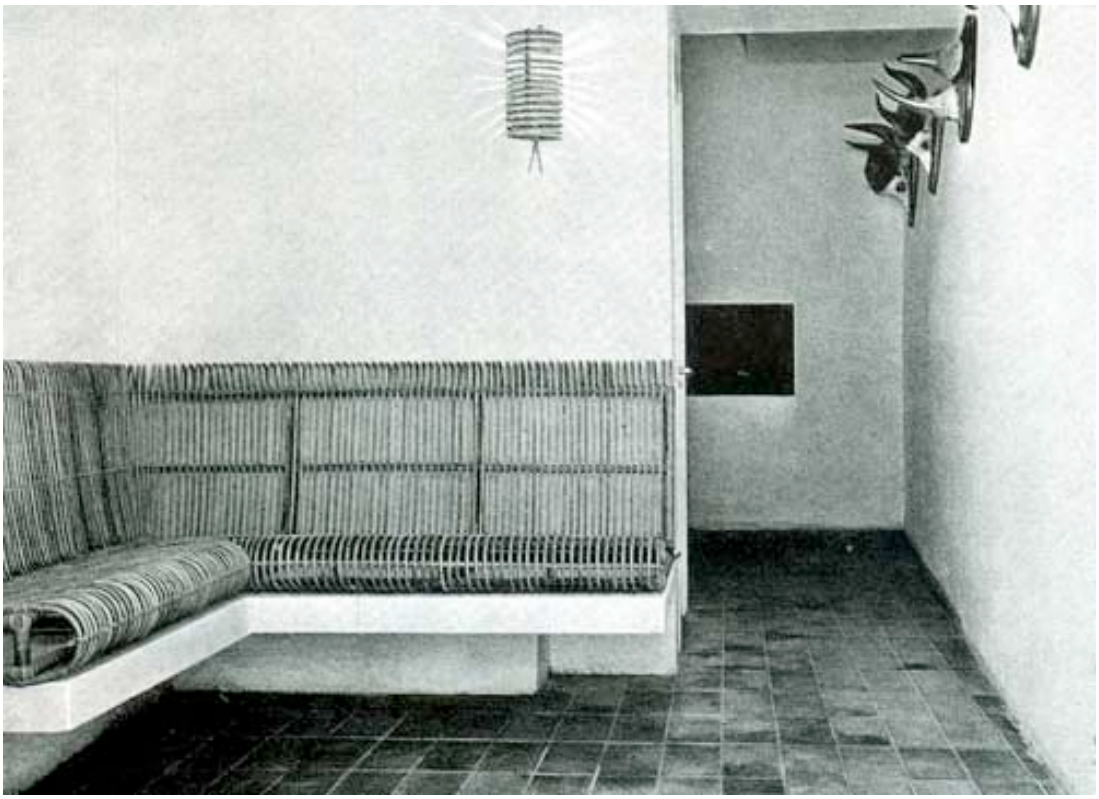
edited by the architect Carlos Flores. I have four volumes in my library, 1959 and 1962-4. The 1959 volume provides something of a survey of the European and American modernism of the moment, and while it includes some indigenous Spanish design, the gist is that of spade work—a primer on the New Look for a constituency just being exposed to it.



By 1962, however, the task of defining and promoting Spanish modern design has begun in earnest. The introduction, roughly translated, predicts that contemporary Spanish living environments can soon be furnished with Spanish design exclusively.



While this confirms the supposition that there was little in the way of Spanish modern design through much of the 1950's, the 1962 issue introduces us to a host of Spanish designers now plying the modern idiom, and doing so with confidence, inventiveness, and verve. I've singled out a cantilevered steel chair by Fernando Ramon, referencing Mies, as a point of departure; a table by Antonio de Moragas that channels mission in its solid simplicity, with a nod to the mid century in its flexibility—the top slides to any position—and demountability; an auditorium chair by Miguel Fisac with a nice posture and sculptural presence; a rakish three-legged plywood chair by Jose Dodero recalling Wegner, Prestini, and Tenreiro; a nice constructivist chair by Julio Bravo, et al; and a fluid lounge chair by Equipo 50 revealing its skeleton of wooden slats.



As for interior design, I was drawn to the clean, Spartan spaces that recalled Spanish monasticism, particularly the dorm room by Obra Sindical del Hogar y Arquitectura, and the foyer by Federico Correa and Alfonso Mil, with its bull's horns. I also liked the varied textures and patterns in the interior by Oriol Bohigas and Jose Maria Martorelli. The names of these designers and architects may all be unfamiliar, but the work speaks

across the decades, and there is no reason I can see why they should not be part of the current dialogue.

From top: steel and leather chair by Fernando Ramon; flexible coffee table by Antonio de Moragas; Constructivist chair by Brava, Lozano, and Pintado; chair by Miguel Fisac Spain; plywood chair by Jose Dodero; ribbed chair by Equipo 57; Cabinet by Salvador and Tomas Diaz Magro; interior by Obra Sindical del Hogar y Arquitectura; interior by Federico Correa and Alfonso Mila; interior by Oriol Bohigas and Jose Maria Martorelli.

Passion Flowers

July 23, 2009

Larry Weinberg

Flowers have long occupied an exalted place in both the fine and decorative arts. As subject matter of still life for artists as diverse as Monet and Mapplethorpe, inspiration for patterns on textiles and dinnerware, and for applied ornament on furniture, flowers have served as a primary motif and symbol.

So there's no reason to make excuses for an obsession with flowers, right? The reason I'm asking is that my father spent a lot of time with flowers. He grew basic ones such as roses, chrysanthemums, rhododendrons, and tulips. But mostly he shot them, with a succession of cameras from Leicas and Hasselblads to digital Canons. He shot them on trips to the tropics, the Canadian Rockies, California, New England, Old England, France, and Italy. Most of the time, however, he shot them in his own backyard, the neighbor's backyard, and nearby parks. He made weekend trips to local garden stores, ostensibly for peat moss, but he always brought his camera.

If you asked him why, which I never did, because from childhood I was glad when he was shooting flowers and not me, he probably would have said he was testing lenses or

new cameras, or was solving technical problems of composition, lighting, focus, exposure, and depth of field. But this would have been protesting too much. The fact

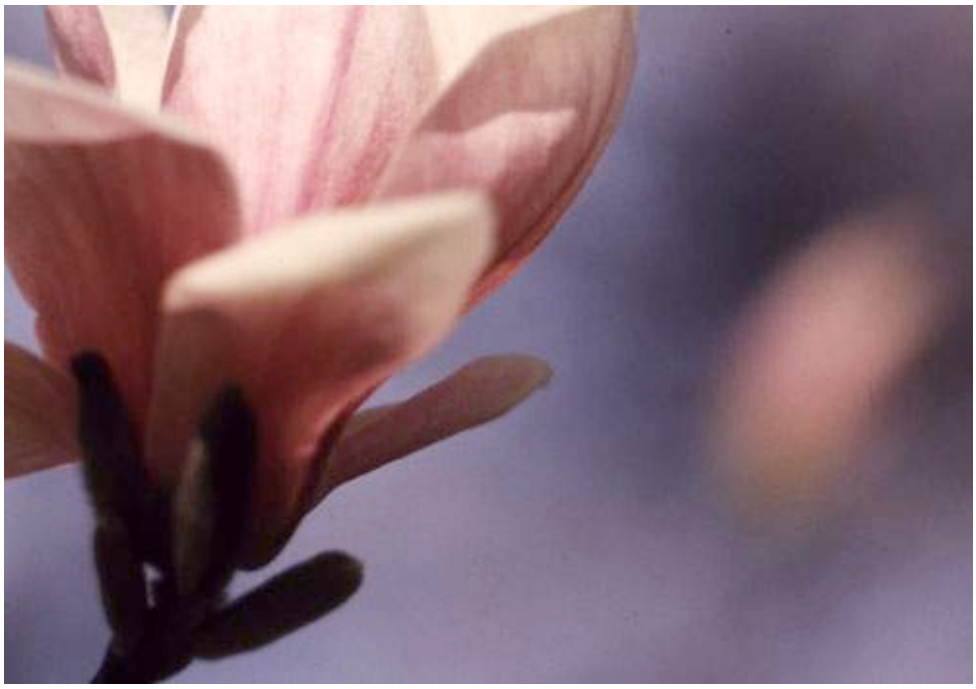
was that he shot the sh&# out of flowers, from as early as I can remember up until he passed away last spring.

Was he doing more than honing his technical skills and testing equipment? I think so. My father loved flowers, their colors, shapes, and textures, their translucence

and delicate beauty, and he lost himself in the challenge of coaxing something out of them. It was one of the few times in his life that he stopped to smell

the roses. The small, intimate, and self-contained worlds he created in his floral photographs were alternately vibrant and lush or moody and ethereal; they were often magical and, as much as I hate to say it, sensual. They were certainly mechanical and technical exercises, but, however tentatively, they were also spiritual and artistic explorations.

Thoreau once said, “Many men go fishing all their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after.” I think my father eventually came to grips with his inner poet, and with some of the lessons to be gleaned looking at flowers, and I think the tipping point was a trip to Monet’s gardens in Giverny in the spring of 2000. My father wrote ahead, submitted a portfolio, and obtained permission to shoot the grounds. Looking around at the artists sketching, and working alongside them, I think he finally saw himself as a kindred spirit.



At Giverny, my father primarily shot landscapes, another passion (and another story), but he returned to his backyard inspired and liberated, and proceeded to spend the summer vigorously and joyously shooting flowers. The images he took show greater self-assurance and confidence, they are bolder and literally more focused. The entire process seems more organic and intuitive: eye-hand-camera, experience and spontaneity, seeing and creating un-self consciously, and taking pleasure in the doing—knowing his equipment, knowing his technique, knowing flowers, and learning about himself. Thoreau would be proud.

"Mon Oncle"
October 23, 2008

Larry Weinberg

Villa Arpel

I watched Jacques Tati's "Mon Oncle" the other night. Focusing on the furniture, I came to realize a few things about the film: Yes, it is a satiric send-up of modern technology and culture, a parable that opposes a modern world at once sleek, antiseptically clean, automated, superficial, and inhospitable with a traditional milieu that is spontaneous and convivial, if messy. And yes, Tati is a latter day Chaplin, a French everyman whose bumblings expose the sterility, fatuousness, and pretension of modern machine civilization. But people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones, and at least part of Tati occupies the modernist and strikingly beautiful Villa Arpel.

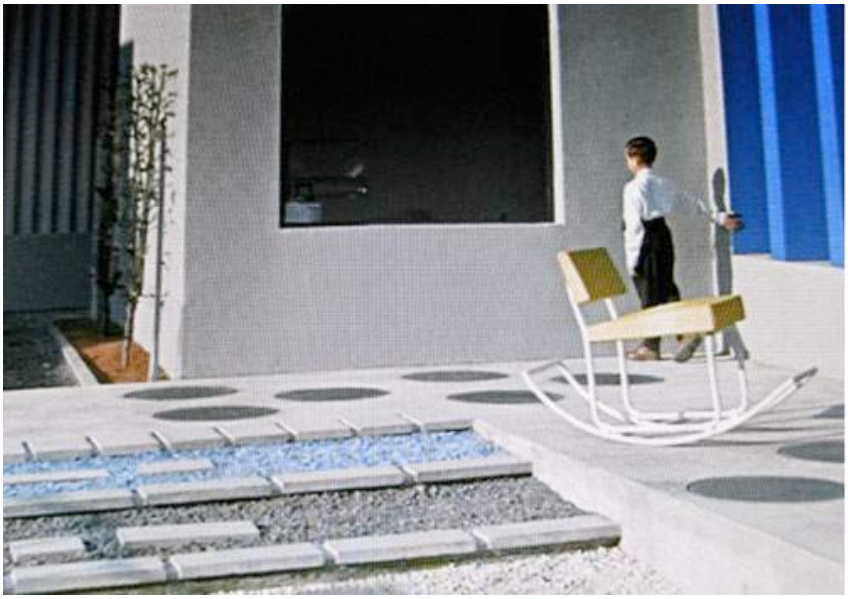
J.A. Motte table and chairs with Chambost vase

Tati was born in 1907 and came of age during the 1920's, the heyday of avant-garde modernism, the era in France of Mallet-Stevens and a young Le Corbusier. If you plainly see in "Mon Oncle" Tati's nostalgia

for a traditional, older world (which, incidentally, was not about to disappear soon in 1950's France), you also see the formative artistic pull of modernism. The Villa Arpel reflects a sensibility weened on Le Corbusier—it is an iteration of the "machine for living in," with its technical gadgets, its decorative asperity, and its conspicuous lack of comfort.

Vista: staircase, fireplace, chair

But even in the 1920's, the machine for living in was more a polemical construct than an actuality. By 1956, no one near the mainstream was seriously advocating living in a machine, nor was minimalism apropos to a decade of rampant consumerism. The Villa Arpel was hence an easy target for satire—a clay pigeon, really—and an idiosyncratic vehicle for a parable. It was also an expression of Tati's own artistic temperament. Tati was a mime with a mime's economy of motion, gesture, and obviously, words. Minimalism is integral to this art form, and



Yellow rocking chair

naturally extends to set design.

It is not surprising, then, that the Villa Arpel is minimalist (“this is the vase”). What is surprising is how far beyond caricature Tati ventures. The Villa Arpel sets are brilliantly edited and meticulously executed, from the selection of furnishings, which include works by designers such as Baltensweiler, Chambost, Mategot, and Motte, to the spare and elegant arrangements of the pieces, to the vivid accents of color visible in the furniture and clothing, to the outdoor landscaping. The vistas are visually exciting and photographically beautiful. Tati needed only to construct a target for his arrows; instead, he created a tour-de-force of mid-century modernism that looks as fresh today as it did fifty years ago, and still resonates as an abstract work of art. In its day, the Villa Arpel was copied by a fan as a residence; more recently, it has been the subject of museum exhibitions tracking Tati’s influence on modern design. In the end, the Villa Arpel was rendered with such aplomb and virtuosity, it was so clearly inspired, that it documents the undeniable joy, delight, and creative exuberance unleashed by avant-garde modernism, and this complicates the message of the film, or perhaps makes it a greater work of art.

Nowhere is Tati’s ambivalence toward modernism more apparent than with the furniture he designed (along with Jacques Lagrange, his longtime set designer) for the Villa Arpel. The three key pieces—the “Haricot” sofa (shaped like a bean), the rocking chair with the yellow seat, and the “Harper” sofa (think two tootsie rolls connected by a folded paper clip)—are designed to convey discomfort. At this they succeed, but again Tati goes further than needed. The rocking chair has a long seat and short back, forcing M. Arpel to slouch when seated, but this element creates an asymmetry that is visually exciting. The Haricot sofa looks impossible to lounge upon, and Hulot is forced to turn it on its side to sleep on it. Try this, though, and you will understand how much effort went into the design, which referenced both Perriand and Kiesler (the 1942 Peggy Guggenheim installation).The Harper sofa is shown with a woman perched rigidly on it, but it is the most beautiful of Tati’s designs—and one of the most striking sofas of the fifties—bridging the precision of the machine age and the sculptural presence of the mid-century (Lescaze meets Noguchi). One could even argue that these pieces rate highly as good design; they are visually excellent and suited to purpose, given that their purpose is to look uncomfortable. As a testament to their enduring appeal, all three designs were recently issued by Domeau & Peres in an edition of eight. Ironically, Tati

anticipated not only the minimalism of the 1960's but the limited-edition, not-for-comfort design/art of the present decade.

Harper sofa with Baltensweiler lamp and Mategot/Jouve stand

Brains and Braun
February 5, 2009

Larry Weinberg

"*Good design for us means as little design as possible. Not for reasons of economy or convenience. It is surely one of the most difficult tasks to arrive at a really convincing, harmonious form by employing simple means…More complicated, unnecessary forms are nothing more than designers' escapades, which have the function of self-expression instead of expressing product functions…The economy of Braun design is a rejection of this type of design; it leaves away everything superfluous to emphasize that which is more important.*" ~Dieter Rams

Electric shavers, SM-3

Few design companies have enjoyed the amount of critical and commercial success that Braun has for the past half century. Founded in 1921 by the engineer Max Braun, the company vaulted to prominence when his sons Artur and Erwin took the helm in 1951. Artur Braun, in particular, recognized the market potential for progressive design thinking in the burgeoning post-war field of consumer electronics. Part entrepreneur, part design auter, Artur turned to the fledgling Ulm School and its rationalist design principles for input. He hired Dieter Rams in 1954, and surrounded him with other Ulm alumni, including Hans Gugelot, Fritz Eichler, Gerd Muller, and Weinhold Reiss. The collaboration proved fruitful, and the Braun product line expanded from radios and hi-fi equipment to electric shavers, fans, hair-dryers, blenders, and televisions. By the end of the 1950's, Braun had become the avatar of a fresh and clean-looking visual aesthetic that helped transform the design landscape.

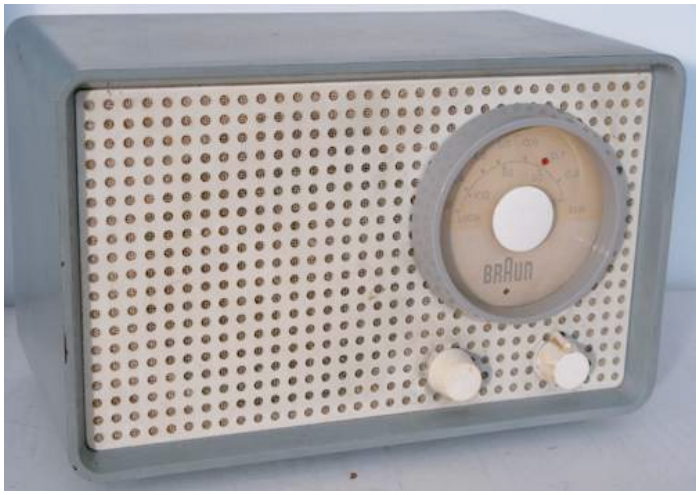
The driving force behind Braun design was Dieter Rams. Rams was officially appointed design director in 1962, and he remained in this position until he retired in 1995. Rams' design philosophy was, literally, simple, and was described by his colleague Rudolf Schonwandt as "order rather than confusion, quiet rather than loud, unobtrusive rather than exciting, sparse rather than profuse, and well-balanced rather than exalted." In his own writing and speeches, Rams indicated strong opposition to extreme visual stimuli and stylistic obsolescence. He abhorred the chaos he perceived in the visual environment, a chaos stemming from too many designs that called attention to themselves, and too much turnover for mere novelty. Rams attempted to counter this with designs that "integrate better and more pleasantly into people's surroundings." Long usage would make these products even more familiar and comfortable.

Record player PS 45

Pocket radio T-41

Rams did not turn a blind eye to appearance, but he sought a timeless rather than a modish beauty, and clearly favored a minimalist visual aesthetic. His mantra of "less, but better" was not a devaluation of the role of design, but rather a reassessment. As the quote at the top suggests, the design process at Braun was

intensive and meticulous, concerned with proportions to the last millimeter, and with details to the last screw fastener.



SK-2 radio

Two products, both illustrated here, exemplify the sea-change in design that took place in the mid-century: the SK-2 radio of 1955 and the SK-4 phono/radio of 1956, also known as “Snow-white’s coffin.” The SK-2, designed by Artur Braun and Fritz Eichler, is to my eye one of the most beautiful and abiding examples of product design from the 20th century. Transistor technology permitted a reduction in scale and the metal case permitted a reduction in material to a maximum thinness. The simple but brilliant decision to extend the speaker perforations across the entire face turned a functional element into a unifying graphic element, one that moreover expresses the underlying aural nature of the product.

Function is self-explanatory, organized logically and legibly into on/off, volume, and station. The SK-4, designed by Dieter Rams and Hans Gugelot, similarly exposes and conveys its function, showing operating elements without disguise or ornamentation. The plastic cover literally conveyed transparency, and quickly became industry-standard.

The run at Braun under Rams’ stewardship was remarkable for its continuity and consistency. If evidence of the excellence of Braun’s product designs is needed, it can be gleaned from length of the

production runs of Braun products, how long these products hold up in usage, the number of Braun designs in the permanent design collections of museums such as MoMA, and the demand for vintage Braun designs among design collectors today.

Images from top: Electric shavers, SM-3. Gerd Muller, 1960. Photo from Flickr; Photonium. Record player PS 45. Dieter Rams, 1962. Photo from Flickr; Photonium. Pocket radio T-41. Dieter Rams, 1959. Photo from Flickr; Marcos Dupico. SK-2 radio. Artur Braun and Fritz Eichler, 1955. Photo by LPW 2. SK-4 phono-super. Dieter Rams and Hans Gugelot, 1956. Photo from Flickr.

A Tale of Two Decades

February 8, 2009

Larry Weinberg

Design sometimes transcends its moment and continues to look fresh, and by virtue of this, timeless. Such is the case with some of the products designed by Braun or Olivetti.

Other times—and this is not necessarily a bad thing—design gets caught up in its moment and winds up encapsulating or expressing a specific cultural or stylistic fact. These products may work well, and wind up in use for years, but they betray their production date at a glance, and retrospective interest in them is inevitably tinged by nostalgia.

One such design, pictured above, is a free-standing speaker attributed to Phillips. The housing is plastic, the grille perforated metal. If I had to pick a date of production—and I don't know for sure—I would pick the mid-1950's. I would not pick the 1940's, nor would I pick the 1960's, at least not after

1965. This speaker looks to me like nothing so much as a Morris Lapidus hotel on Collins Avenue. I can almost picture the palm trees lining the circular drive in front, and the biomorphic pool fronting the beach in the back. I don't know if the tweeter is separated from the woofer, but the top pivots, throwing the swooping curve into sharp relief. I think it looks cooler this way, and I think the hotel it resembles would look cooler this way, too.

The Fontainebleau Hotel taken from "Morris Lapidus: Architect of the American Dream," 1992.

In any event, the logo on the front—possibly a PH in a box—is also of the era, and the entire design exudes 1950's style and swagger. Despite being dated in this way, I would hesitate to call this design kitschy. The best definition of kitsch I've encountered, outside of the one in the dictionary, is an object that conveys everything it has to convey at a glance. I've had this speaker (actually, a pair of them) for several years, and I am still intrigued by them, and without irony. This has something to do with the way the appearance changes when the top is straight or

askew, how different it looks from the front and the back, and how the brass grille catches the light, sometimes shimmering, sometimes stopping the eye at the surface, and sometimes permitting the eye to see through—almost like architecture. Also, I suspect the speaker would sound good if I could plug it in to anything, especially with the top part swiveled to direct the tweeter at the listener's position.

The JVC video capsule, also made primarily of plastic, is equally dated, albeit to a different decade. As its name suggests, it looks, with the video element closed, like an Apollo space capsule, and if you guessed a production date around 1970, in the wake of the moon landing, you would be correct. The fact that my 12-year-old nephew could have guessed this really locates this object in a precise cultural moment. (Actually, my nephew is really smart, and would upbraid me if he read this, saying something like "I must upbraid you, Uncle Larry."). With the top up, the TV looks something like a robot. Being a Japanese product, I suspect that there is a specific reference to a movie or TV robot of the late 1960's. In the end, I'm not sure this design falls on the good side of the kitsch line, but I've kept it because I would have loved to have one in 1970.

JVC video capsule

Tin Man: Christopher Dresser's Work in Humble Metals

March 5, 2009

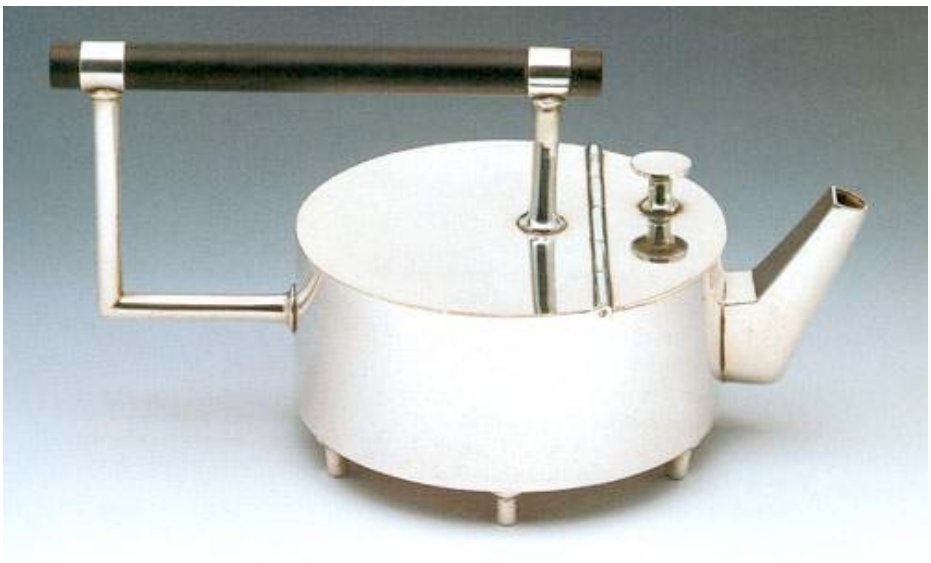
Larry Weinberg

Christopher Dresser (1834-1904) cut a wide swath across 19th-century culture and commerce. In a career spanning 50 years, he wrote and lectured about botany and ornament, and produced an array of designs in areas as diverse as furniture, dinnerware, glass, ceramics, silver, textiles, and wallpaper. Hugely successful and influential in his day, he was nonetheless marginalized after his death by a design press that all but lionized William Morris.

Reassessment was slow to take place, and focused on the proto-modernist aspects of his work, specifically on the geometric and austere silver designs of the 1870's and 1880's. Nicholas Pevsner devoted all of one paragraph to Dresser in his 1936 *Pioneers of the Modern Movement,* citing a pair of silver cruets for their startling simplicity of form. *Herwin Schaefer* similarly mentioned Dresser in passing in *Nineteeth Century Modern (1970)*, again focusing solely on the prescient modernity of the silver designs for Hukin & Heath and Dixon & Sons. Only in the past twenty years has a fuller and more balanced picture of Dresser emerged. Notable here are the monographs by Widar Halen (1990) and Stuart Durant (1993), and the 2004 exhibition catalog *Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser's Design Revolution.* These accounts have in common an attempt to illustrate

Christopher Dresser's tin candle holder and watering can for Perry & Son's, 1880.

the range of Dresser's work, and to relocate Dresser as a Victorian thinker and creator, as much a man of his day as ahead of it.



Silver-plated teapot for James Dixon & Sons, c. 1880.

Still, in all these writings the astonishing silver designs take center stage. Executed after his epochal trip to Japan in 1877, the silver and silver-plated teapots, decanters, tureens, and toast racks look to our eyes more like Bauhaus or post-modern objects than like Victorian things. They represent a body of work unrivaled in the 19th century, and still relevant in the 21st century—original examples can fetch in excess of $100,000, and Alessi recently re-issued a series of Dresser's silver designs in stainless steel. Lost amidst the fanfare for the silver design is Dresser's work in tin, copper, and brass.

Generally, the designs in these humble metals are treated as poor cousins to the silver designs, and they garner less print and fewer illustrations in the literature. To some extent, this is because less is known about this work, including which designs Dresser himself was responsible for. Still, there is no doubt that in the 1870's and 80's Dresser's office did work in copper and brass for Benham & Froud, and in tin, copper, and brass for Perry & Sons of Wolverhampton. The latter company in particular has attracted my attention, and I have over the years examined 20-25 different Perry & Sons designs that I would attribute to Dresser, and I

would guess there are at least as many more still out there. I have collected about a dozen examples, six of which are illustrated here.

Pewter pitcher and tin candleholder for Perry & Sons.

What unites and identifies Dresser's work for Perry & Sons is what separates it from most Victorian design—the interplay of geometric forms, the origami-like foldings, the bold use of color, and the lack of superficial ornament. The low cost of the materials, combined with the relative ease of working them, allowed a tangible freedom of expression not present in the silver work. The tin (and brass) candle holders and watering cans convey a sense of delight and exuberance; they are inexpensive but confident works that make a bold and progressive visual statement. I would suggest that the Dresser design team's tin pieces for Perry were to the late 19th century what the Nelson design team's clocks for Howard Miller were to the 1950's—the output of a laboratory for creative experiment and design-play, and a proving ground for new shapes and forms. Yet, before we rip Dresser out of his Victorian milieu, we should point out, as one wag did, that while Dresser was designing forward-looking tin candle holders, Edison was inventing light bulbs.

Brass pitcher and tin candleholder for Perry & Sons.

Larry Weinberg

A Fairy Tale of New York: The World's Fair

March 19, 2009

Once upon a time, never mind how long ago, a young boy visited a great World's Fair. It was a signal moment in the boy's life, and he was fortunate to return several more times before it closed.

Being a young boy, much was new to him, but in his estimation nothing could match the fair for sheer wonderment and delight. The fair was a vast smorgasbord of sensory stimulation: visual, aural, gustatory, and tactile. Everywhere he went there were things to see and do. There were buttons to push and rides to ride; there were exotic smells and new things to eat.

The fair seemed to the boy to be in constant motion, what with the monorails and jitneys, flume rides and moving walkways, and the constant throng of bustling visitors. He rode up and down and around, he soared to dizzying heights, and he traveled in time and space. He enjoyed visiting the past, but the entire fair drew him inexorably toward a future that

appeared bright and bursting with possibility. The boy sensed a heady synchronicity in this as his entire life was ahead of him, and he wondered if others felt the same way.

The boy reveled in the details of the fair, and they burned into his memory. The Kodak Pavilion, with its picture carousel, the Ford Pavilion, with its car ride through time, the phone booths, the line to get onto the monorail, the costumes and customs of different countries, the tacos and

Belgian waffles, the Pieta, the dolphins and flamingos, the dancers and mariachi, the map of New York state you walked across, Snow White and Sneezy, and the Disney ride that supplied the soundtrack that ran continually through the boy's head—"It's a world of

laughter a world of tears, it's a world of hope and a world of fears…"

And, of course, there was Dinoland. Truth be told, if the boy had his way, he'd have spent all his time with the dinosaurs, as long as someone brought him a Belgian waffle every now and then. Towering over the Fair, visible from the highway, were full-sized replicas of all his favorites—tyrannosaurus, brontosaurus, allosaurus, stegosaurus, triceratops. He could name them all, and recite their vital statistics and food preferences. Dinosaurs were the boy's passion, and he felt himself lucky indeed to be walking amongst them.

Looking back years later, never mind how many, the boy—now a man—still marvels at the sheer wonderment of it all. It was so exotic and exciting, so stylish, beautiful, and magical. There were so many new things to see, an ever-changing kaleidoscope of shapes and

colors. The boy knew little of art and even less of architecture, but he absorbed and felt and learned. He took it all in, and it took him in, and the visual imprint remained dormant in him for years until such time as he was ready to see things that way again. The man now has nephews who play marvelous video games undreamt of when he was young, but to be five and six years old at the fair—he would not trade that for the world.

Images from top: Dino the Dinosaur overlooking fair grounds; Austrian pavilion as mise-en-scene; Upward look at elevator of New York State Pavilion; Glass dome of New York State Pavilion; Yellow and white close-up with fountain; Interior shot of the Ford Pavilion; View of Swiss Sky Ride; Larry Weinberg as a small child with dinosaur.

All images by Richard Weinberg

Shopping at Mid-Century: Baldwin Kingrey and New Design

April 2, 2009

Larry Weinberg

New Design shop, New York 1948

I wrote a post several months ago about a Boston-area designer and overall renaissance person, Fran Hosken. During the late 1940's, Fran visited a number of department stores and boutique shops trying to find retail outlets for her work. Wherever she traveled, Fran took color slides of modern architecture and interiors. From what I have seen, Fran was not a great photographer. Her pictures were apt to be out of focus, but her intellect was laser-like and she was nothing if not methodical. The result was a lifelong mission that produced tens of thousands of slides, the bulk of which now form an archive at Texas A&M University.

On a field trip to Chicago in 1948, Fran stopped at the recently opened modern design shop, Baldwin Kingrey (BK). I don't think BK wound up distributing any of Fran's pieces, but the pictures Fran took provide a window into this now-legendary emporium, and literally add color to a monograph about the shop published a few years ago by Richard Wright called *Baldwin Kingrey: Midcentury Modern in Chicago.*

Established in 1947, BK was among the first shops in the country to focus exclusively on progressive modernist design, or what John Brunetti, the author of the monograph, called affordable good design. A major entrepôt for Alvar Aalto furniture and glass, BK also showcased local and regional talent. Drawing on the abilities of architect/designer Harry Weese and noted interior designer Benjamin Baldwin—the husband and brother, respectively, of principal Kitty Baldwin—BK proffered a glimpse of a spare new aesthetic, and became a gathering place for local architects, designers, and Institute of Design students.

Baldwin Kingrey shop, Chicago 1948

Visible in Fran's pictures of BK are furniture designs by Cranbrook grads Charles and Ray Eames; lighting by Harry Weese, Walter von Nessen, and Kurt Versen; wooden bowls by Institute of Design grad and instructor James Prestini; jewelry by Cranbrook grad Harry Bertoia; and textiles by Institute of Design grad Angelo Testa. Additional offerings during the successful ten-year run under Kitty Baldwin and Jody Kingrey included furniture by Bruno Mathsson, Borge Mogensen, Eero Saarinen, George Nelson, and Harry Weese; toys by Kaj Bojesen; fabrics by Alexander Girard; glass by Venini and Blenko; and artworks by Hugo Weber and Bob Tague.

As its name suggests, the New Design Shop in New York was another pioneering showcase of the sort of design soon to be codified by MoMA as "Good Design." Like BK, New Design consisted of artfully composed room arrangements, with meticulous attention paid to background details such as curtains, rugs, and wall colors, so that a

Baldwin Kingrey shop, Chicago 1948

way of living and an interior aesthetic were promoted as well as a collection of objects. Unlike BK, New Design did not last long, and Fran's pictures are among the few records of this long-defunct business.

A close look at the pictures of New Design shows a somewhat different mix than BK, with less European design, and a strong focus on work from the NYC-based Knoll company, marking New Design as an early distributor of Knoll. Among the Knoll pieces evident in the photos are chairs and sofas by Jens Risom; sideboards, desks, and letter trays by Florence Knoll; side tables by Abel Sorenson; and a coffee table by George Nakashima, who was then part of the Knoll design team. Other American designs in the collection include chairs, tables, and screens by Charles and Ray Eames; stacking aluminum chairs by Jack Hainey; case pieces and clocks by George Nelson; outdoor furniture by Van Keppel Green; lighting by Kurt Versen and Walter von Nessen; glassware by Aalto and Chemex; dinnerware by Russel Wright; textiles by Angelo Testa; and modernist jewelry, probably by Art Smith and Sam Kramer. A friend of Fran's, the proprietor of New Design also showed several Hosken Inc. designs.

New Design shop, New York 1948

New Design shop, New York 1948

Despite a lack of primary evidence, I have no doubt that the New Design shop functioned in a manner similar to Baldwin Kingrey. The forums created by BK and New Design reflected what was happening in the moment in progressive design and architecture circles. Both shops helped disseminate ideas about modern design, cross-pollinating architects, designers, and interior designers, and cultivating and educating a new clientele. If I could imaginatively enter these photographs, I'd try to sample the sense of discovery and shared purpose, but mostly I'd try to pick up a red Eames child's chair or a Bertoia necklace or a Bianconi vase at 1948 prices.

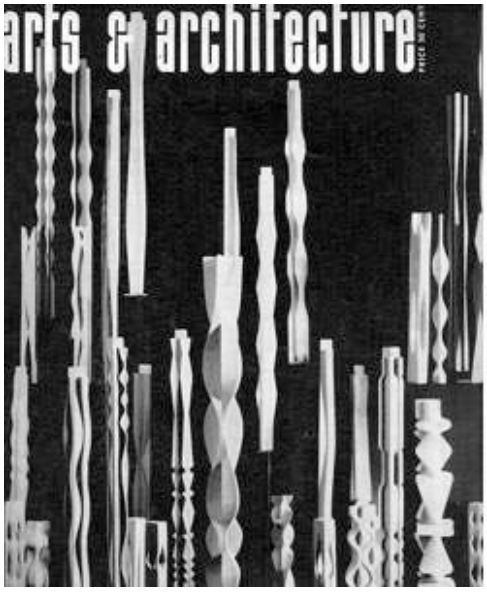
All images by Fran Hosken.

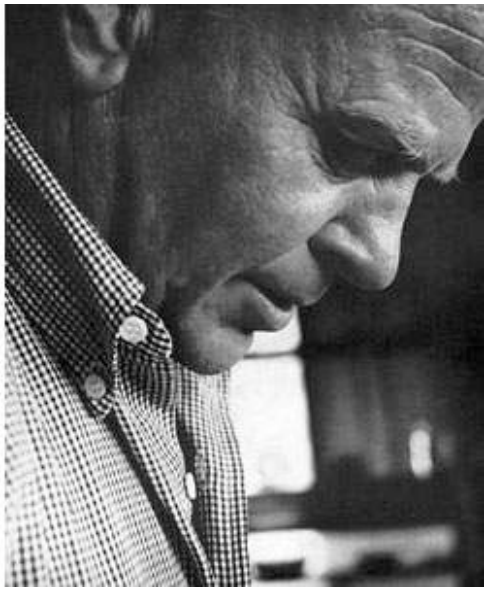
New Design shop, New York 1948

Bio-Feedback: The Work of Jan de Swart

April 23, 2009

Larry Weinberg





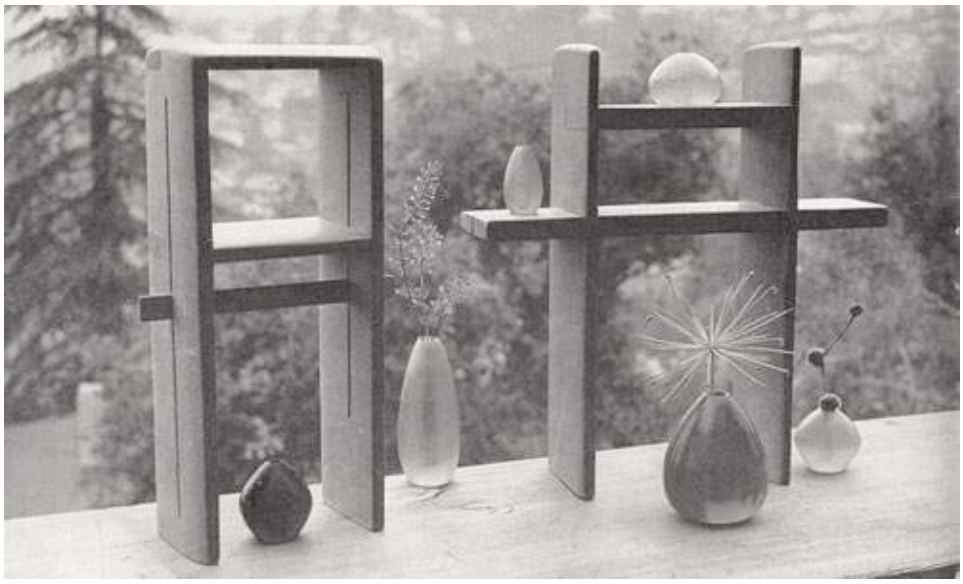
Studies in wood for columns and dividers from Art & Architecture *in 1956; Portrait of Jan de Swart from* Craft Horizons *Jan/Feb issue 1958*

"The rest of man is just waste, but this wonderful thing—originating—is the one permanent thing that man has, and it is the least used…" —Jan de Swart, 1958

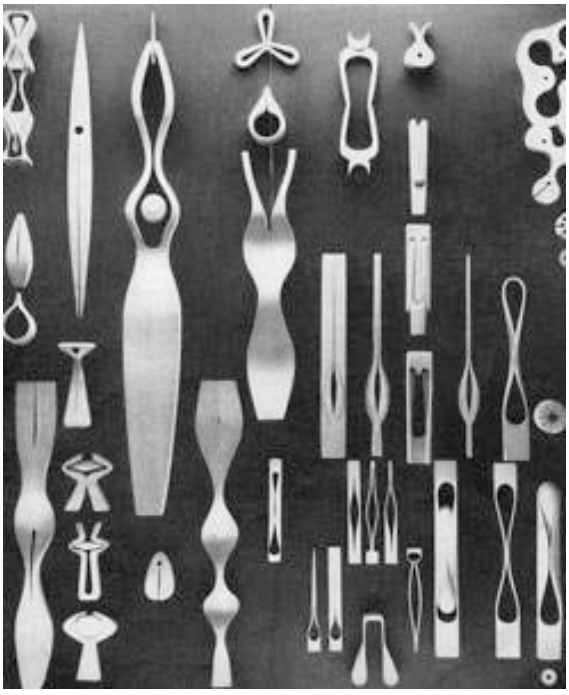
Artist, engineer, craftsman, inventor, and philosopher: so is Jan de Swart variously described in a 1958 article in *Craft Horizons*. Holder of more than 50 patents, de Swart made enough money designing plastic fasteners and other useful objects to indulge his lifelong passion for pure or basic research in design. Seldom exhibiting, he became something of a legend among artist-craftsman, who were familiar with his experiments in color, form, and line, and his exploration of the techniques and properties of new materials, without ever seeing his work in person.

Born in Holland in 1908, de Swart immigrated to America in 1928, winding up in California. His career represents a sustained meditation on the interrelationships of art, science, and technology. He was absorbed, as was Emerson before him, with the creative act itself, with the wellspring of inspiration, which he located in the subconscious, intuitive realm. "Nothing is so ugly," he noted, "as a self-conscious

attempt to discover beauty." His methods and metaphors were at root organic: "[pure] research is brought about by the force of curiosity, and reveals facts that enable us to approach a problem from within, letting the answer grow toward the greatest possible harmony." So, too, were his forms, which were often biological in both the biomorphic and molecular senses.



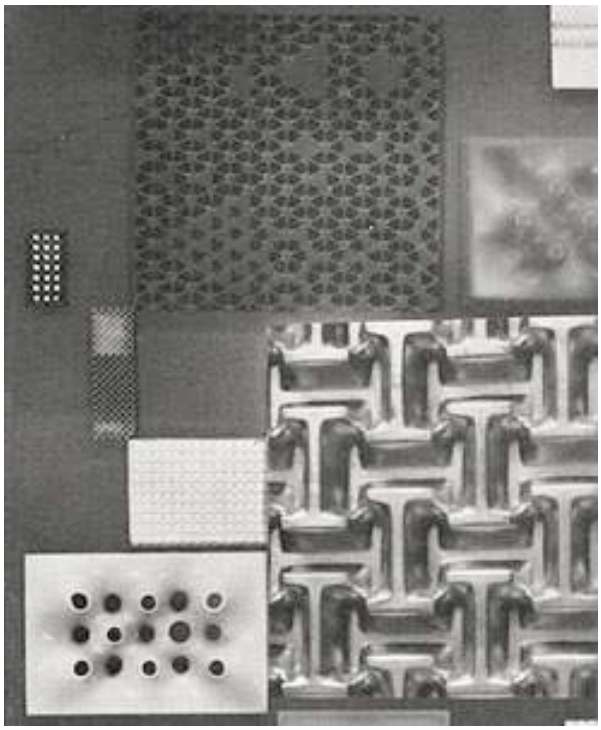
Experimental vase forms in colored plastic from Craft Horizons January/February issue 1958



Forms in wood based on microscopic research from Craft Horizons *January/February issue 1958*

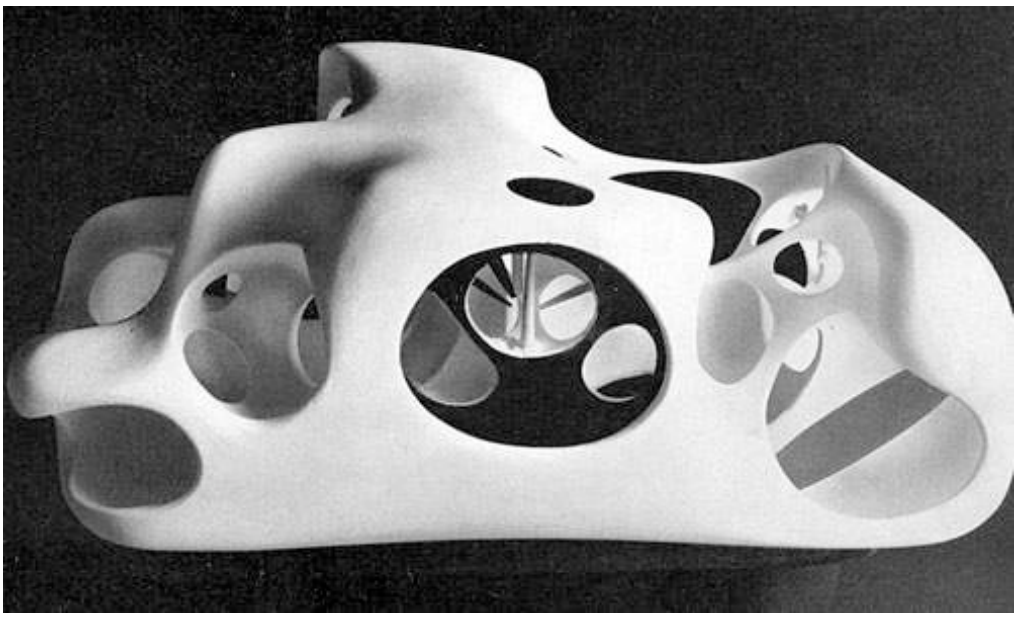
De Swart's formal explorations were rendered in plastic, wood, and cast cement. He experimented endlessly with wooden shapes that were hand-cut with a power tool. Deemed a wizard with the band saw, and likened to a concert violinist, de Swart produced countless studies for architectural ornament, intended to be integrated directly into the structure of buildings as columns, screens, and panels. Significantly, de Swart worked quickly, tempering his perfect control of the saw with the immediacy and spontaneity of a sketch.

To understand de Swart's work on a deep level, it must literally be looked at through a microscope. His quest for new functional forms led de Swart to the invisible world of molecular biology. Here, he sought nothing less than the essence of structure in nature. Drawing on fundamental principles of organic cell structures, he developed seven man-made structural patterns adaptable to plastic wall panels. These punched, three-dimensional modules confer structural integrity—maximum strength with minimum weight—and, in series, can become a screen or an exterior surface of a wall.



Man-made cell modules derived from living structures, from Zodiac 5, 1957

Writing in *Zodiac 5* in 1957, Jules Langsner grasps the significance of de Swart's work, and sums up his career admirably. De Swart, Langsner writes, "is a restlessly inquisitive spirit seeking new forms appropriate to the new kind of world taking shape before our eyes." Langner judges de Swart's plastic panels to be extremely satisfying as visual forms.



Model for a cast concrete play structure from Zodiac 5

“Here is a mode of ornamentation,” Langsner concludes, “integral to modern concepts of building without nostalgic references to motifs of earlier periods.”

This adaptation of living cells as modular architectural building blocks at once structural and ornamental represents a conceptual breakthrough of stunning elegance and power. I don’t know of too many others—then or now—exploring this avenue of organic design. That de Swart’s work remained largely hidden from view in its day is perhaps apropos. Since his death in 1987, however, his estate has come on the market, and examples of his work are available through Los Angeles Modern Auctions.

Study in spatial relationships in wood, c. 1947; author’s collection

Glass Plus: The Furniture Design of Henry P. Glass

April 30, 2009

Larry Weinberg

“In contrast to good music, good literature, good food, or even good art, which are all subject to personal taste, style, fashion, or fad, good design is governed by indisputable, eternal rules, unalterable by conditions of historic environment or location.” -Henry Glass, from “The Shape of Manmade Things” (1994)

While debatable, the above assertion is explicable in terms of Henry Glass’s mindset and life experience. At root, Glass was an industrial designer, not a craftsman or artist, and he brought an engineering sensibility to bear on all aspects of his work, including furniture design. Born in Vienna in 1911, and schooled in architecture at the Technische Hochschule, Glass arrived in America in 1939 via Buchenwald. His experience in a concentration camp likely exaggerated any tendency he had to see his own work in absolute terms, and his rescue likely fueled his desire to spread the benefits of good design to the general public, another part of his lifelong agenda.

An ardent environmentalist, Glass was heavily influenced in his thinking by Buckminster Fuller, a debt explicitly recognized in "The Shape of Manmade Things." From Fuller, Glass drew lessons in nature, structure, economy, and ecology. In nature, Glass found a model for man-made objects: all things serve a purpose, little is superfluous in terms of ornament or material, and the results are often beautiful. Rigid economy is fundamental in design for serial production; more so when resources are recognized as finite, as they are on Spaceship Earth. As Glass observed, “It is hard to think of an object that was

designed with economy in mind, which wouldn't also respond to ecological considerations, and vice-versa." Glass built a solar house for himself in 1948, one of the first such structures in the country. Clearly, he was an early proponent of what is now green design.

Scale model of "Contoura" chaise

Glass was best known for his knock-down furniture designs, chairs and tables that folded, nested, and stacked. There was a wartime rationale for such designs involving space-saving flexibility and easy mobility, but he continued developing this paradigm throughout his career. Austere and visually interesting, these designs utilized inexpensive materials such as plywood, masonite, and canvas, and through tensile strength and production technique, reduced waste to a minimum. Here, too, Glass was plainly influenced by Fuller, by the geodesics and tetrahedrons, riffing off the idea of "tensegrity," inter-connected wires in tension, and non-connected struts in compression.

Henry Glass; Swing-line cabinet, 1950's. Images courtesy of IDSA Chicago.

Glass' most popular design, the Cricket chair of 1978, distills forty years of thought and experiment into a timeless-looking piece that uses an absolute minimum of material—in this case, tubular metal and canvas—and folds down to 1 inch. Represented here by a prototype in wood from Glass' own collection, the production version was manufactured by Brown Jordan.

Not all of Glass' designs hit their mark commercially, however, and a fair amount of his work exists only in renderings, scale models, prototypes, and catalogs.

I first encountered Glass design in a basement in Mineola in 1993, when I found myself surrounded by a suite of modular and highly colorful children's furniture. Research proved that I'd uncovered a trove of Swingline collection pieces, designed by Glass and produced by Fleetwood Furniture in the early 1950's. I think I paid about $150 for six or eight pieces, which I promptly sold for $400-$500 a piece, a tidy profit at the time but far less than the $4,000-$6,000 a piece that these items command now at auction. Still, it whetted my appetite for work by Glass,

Study for elementary school furniture, 1963; photo courtesy of IDSA Chicago. Prototype of folding sling chair, c. 1958

Prototype of "Cricket" chair, c. 1970; Scale models of folding furniture; photo by Wright.

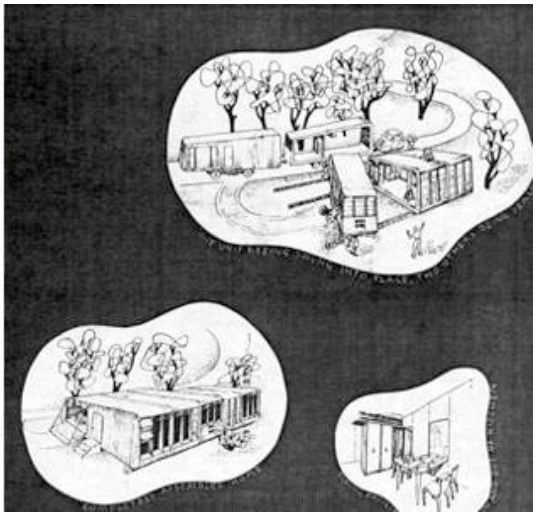
and when the Form + Function Gallery acquired a group of prototypes from Glass in 2000, I sped over and picked up a few. Three are shown here.

Prototype masonite chairs, 1942

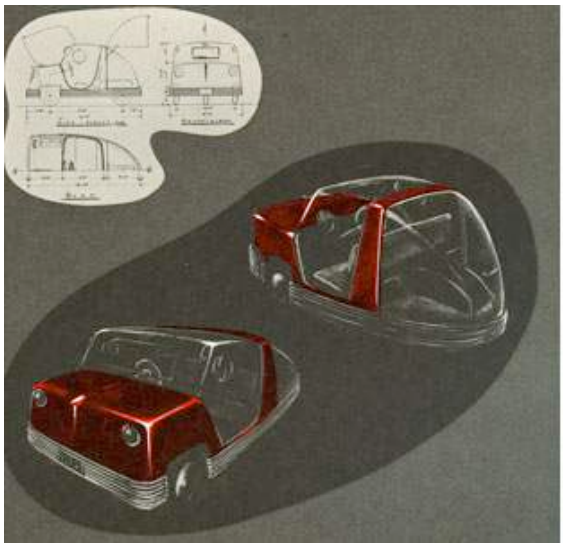
Second Glass: The Industrial Design and Architecture of Henry P. Glass

May 7, 2009

Larry Weinberg



I posted last week about Henry Glass's furniture designs. This week, I'm going to look at his industrial design and architecture, or at least at sketches thereof. In perusing his self-published catalog of 1970—his portfolio, actually—I responded time and again to fanciful and often boldly colored proposals for designs and structures that likely never went into production. More than this, that never stood a chance of going into production, and can best be classified as romantic or utopian. I suspect that Glass felt the same way I did about these projects—he featured them in his portfolio, after all—and I'd guess they provided him with an ongoing source of intellectual and creative nourishment.

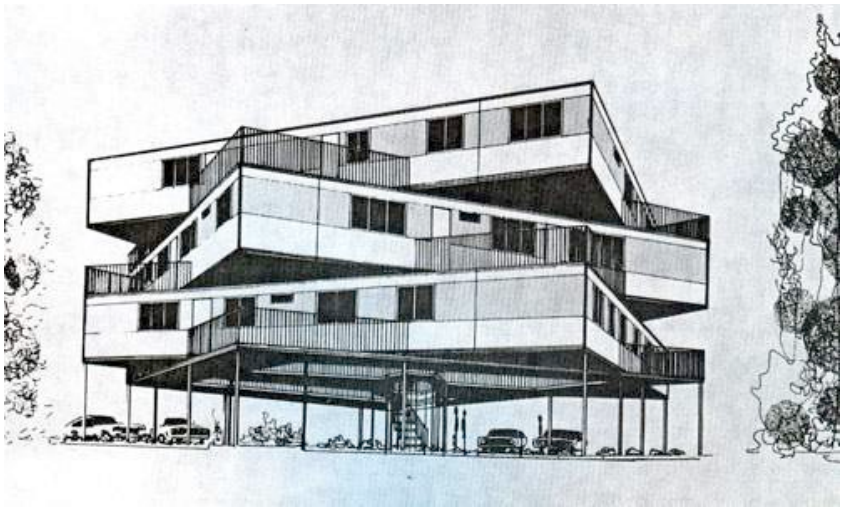


For all his interest in mechanisms and modules, and for all his rationalist theory, Henry Glass had a fertile and vivid design imagination, and was given to flights of expressive visual fancy. How do we characterize the visual aspect of his sliding ponds and phone booths, his cars and jungle gyms? By and large, they are biomorphic, fluid, curvilinear, colorful, and visionary. They convey a sense of plasticity and malleability, and hence of possibility. They appear people-friendly and optimistic. The word "imagineering" comes to mind—some Disney-esque combination of imagination and engineering; this was Glass's work zone, and the Disney reference may not be far-fetched given the range of children's furniture and playground equipment he designed.

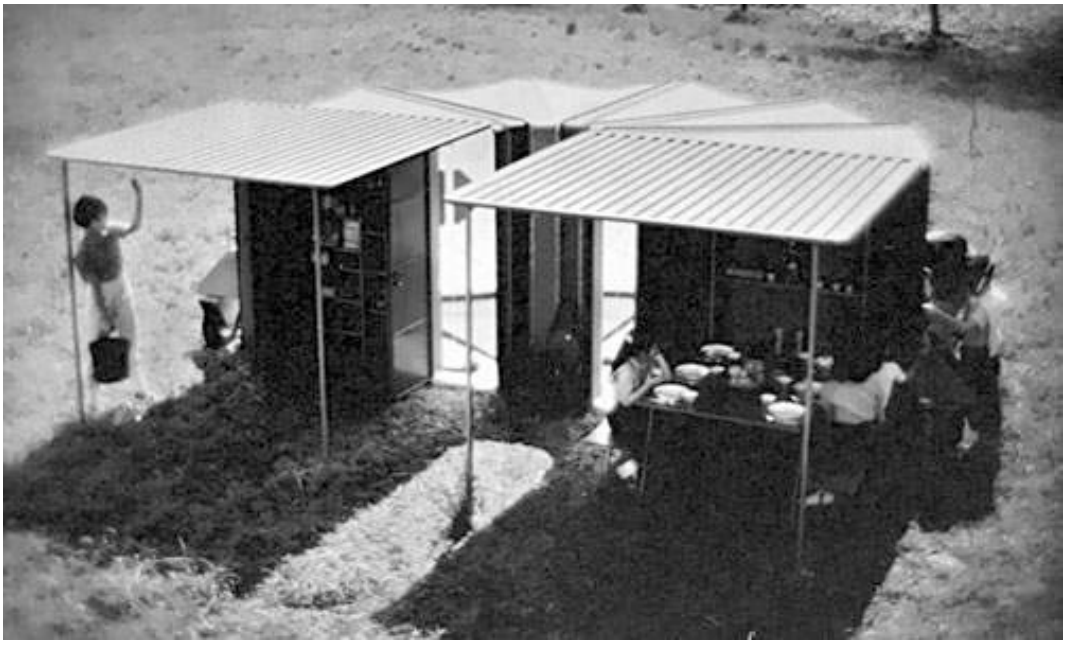
Glass's architectural thinking is a direct extension of his design thinking (or vice-versa—Glass trained as an architect in Vienna, though he was never licensed here). Once again, in looking through his catalog, I was drawn to unrealized sketches more so than to built structures. Glass showed an early interest in pre-fabricated, factory-produced housing, an interest directly related to his modular furniture designs. The 1944 sketches for *Interiors Magazine* are reproduced here. The freeform styling of the rendering in

itself suggests a core concern with people—human scale, biomorphic shape, and an organic relationship between people and the environment.

Glass's 1969 apartment building proposal depicts box-like shapes more conducive to fabrication. That Glass was still planning pre-fabricated housing in the late 1960's, when few other Americans were, shows a sustained and admirable commitment to working out ideas he deemed important. Note also the model for the collapsible aluminum shelter, an architectural analog to his fold-up, knock-down furniture designs.

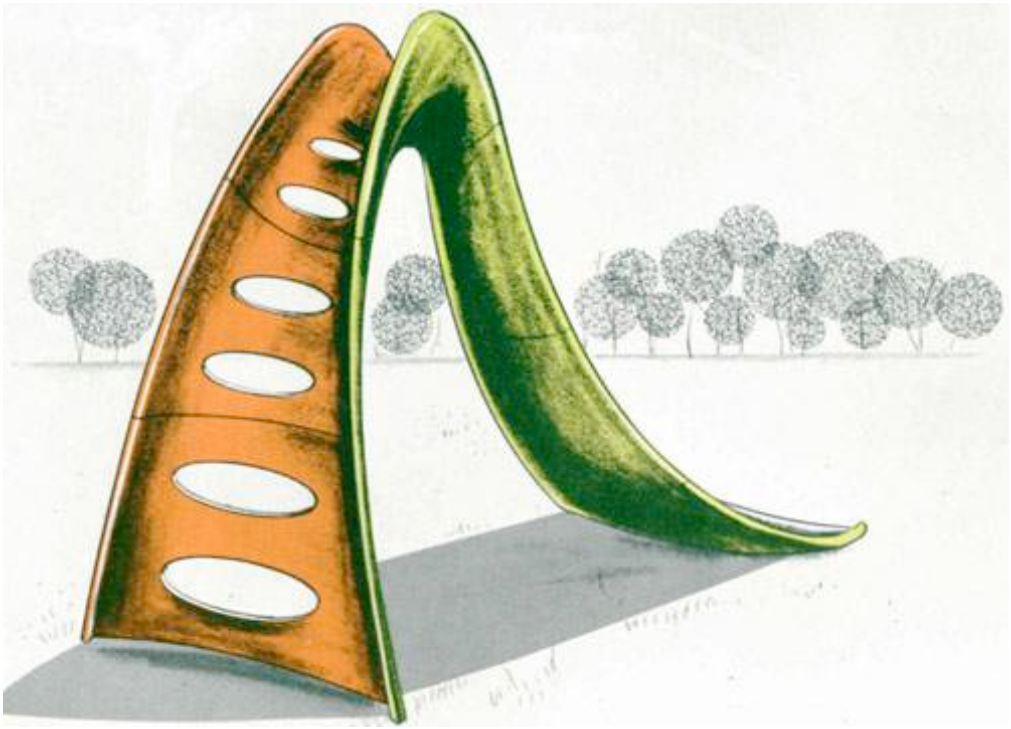


Glass produced something on the order of 20,000 drawings during his career. This is a prodigious output



that bespeaks a passionate discipline for the process of designing. Some of these drawings have been sold through Architech Gallery in Chicago, which represents the

Glass estate. Many of Glass's design ideas, as well as the forms that expressed them, were simply out of step with commercial realities and prevailing tastes. To his credit, Glass kept drawing. That a number of his abiding concerns—pre-fabrication, modularity, affordability, waste, ecological responsibility—are now topical suggests that Glass's legacy, as embodied in his drawings, is due for re-evaluation, and for belated recognition of cultural relevance.



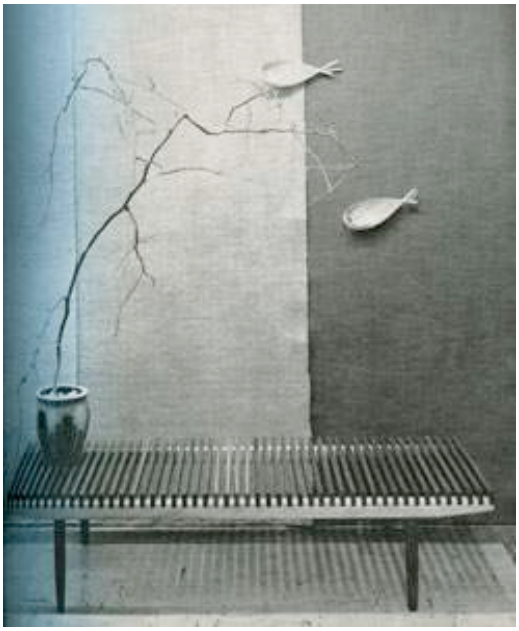
From top: Moulded phone booth sketch for Gladwin Plastics, 1966; study in factory produced modular housing for Interiors Magazine, 1944; suburban car proposal for Science and Mechanics, 1951; metal fireplace sketch for Technology/Welded Products, 1967; pre-fab metal slide sketch for Miracle Equipment Co., 1969; sketch for pre-fab modular apartment for Mobile Homes Mfg, 1969; Accordium folding mobile shelter for ALCOA, 1960. All images from the Henry P. Glass Association catalog.

Larry Weinberg

Sam Maloof: Requiem for a Woodworker

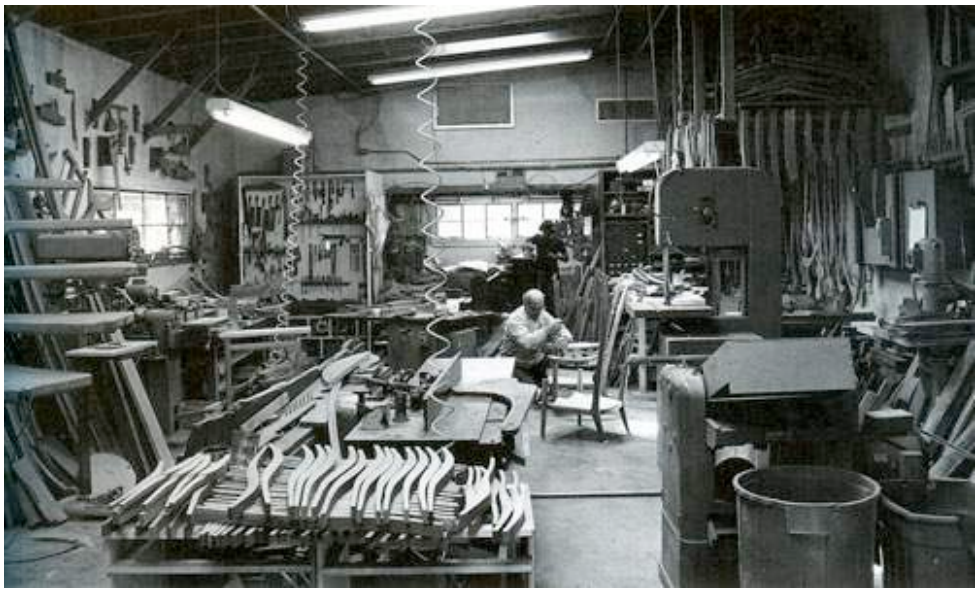
May 28, 2009

"The hand of man touches the world itself, lays hold of it and transforms it…The artist, carving wood, hammering metal, kneading clay, keeps alive for us man's own dim past, something without which we could not exist…In the artist's studio are to be found the hand's trials, experiments, and divinations, the age-old memories of the human race which has not forgotten the privilege of working with its hands." — Henri Focillon, from "The Life of Forms in Art" (1942)



With Sam Maloof's passing over the weekend, at age 93, America lost one of its premier craft woodworkers, and a solid link in a chain stretching back through history. Maloof understood and appreciated the privilege of working with his hands, and of living the way he saw fit. For Maloof, the smell of wood and the satisfaction in making a good piece of furniture, the joy in creating and then in giving pleasure to others, formed the basis of a rewarding and meaningful life. Humble and gracious, he referred to himself as simply a woodworker, though of course he was more than that. During a career that spanned six decades, he became a living argument for the vitality and relevance of the designer-craftsman.

Maloof began his career as a furniture maker shortly after WWII. According to Michael Stone, author of "Contemporary American Woodworkers" (1986), Maloof typified this generation of craftsmen—self-taught and fiercely independent, they were forced to create their own market for handmade furniture. Maloof never forgot the financial difficulties he faced when starting up, nor the absence of role models. By all accounts, he was generous with his time and energy, encouraging young artisans, performing lectures and workshops, and diligently advocating and promoting craft causes. Gerard O'Brien of Reform Gallery, who befriended Maloof in the past decade, emphasizes Maloof's activism, suggesting that he helped bring cohesion to the American craft movement.



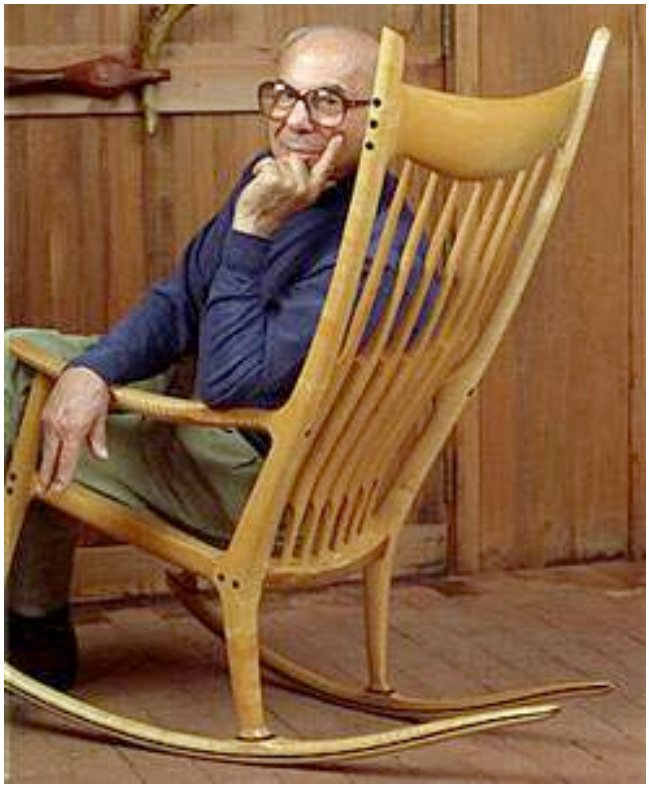
Maloof stated his design philosophy succinctly: "My goal is to make furniture that people can be comfortable living with. If you're not preoccupied with making an impact with your designs, chances are something that looks good today will look good tomorrow." Structural and visual durability were the essence of Maloof's craft—he built things to last, from artful and sturdy joints to classically simple forms that he refined and improved over time. Rather than chasing novelty, Maloof mined a finite number of designs that became idiomatic for his oeuvre and iconic for American craft. By varying his themes and building by eye and feel, Maloof produced a rich diversity in his output.

As he noted, his pieces all differ a little bit. Maloof's most popular designs—and the ones for which he will best be remembered—are his chairs. Sinuous and sensuous, they led one commentator to rhapsodize, "When a designer-craftsman can give the back of a simple settee a gentle curve that is sheer controlled voluptuousness, or taper a chair arm into a flattened swell as organic as the human arm that will rest upon it, he has achieved the ultimate in elegance…" Maloof's chairs are comfortable to sit in and inviting to touch. Few examples of modern design can surpass them for visual and tactile delight.

Evaluating his career in 1983, Maloof quoted Emerson, who said "I look on the man as happy who, when there is a question of success, looks into his work for his reply." By

this measure, or by any other, Sam Maloof was a successful and a happy man. “God willing,” he wrote in the early 1970’s, “I don’t want to retire. I could work with my hands as long as I live…” Sam Maloof worked with his hands up until the month before he died. His life, and his work, are now a part of our cultural heritage, and will remain a source of inspiration to craftsmen, and to all who enjoy craftsmanship.

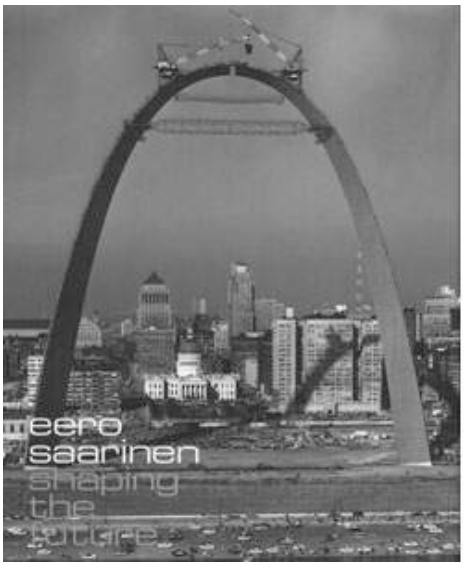
From top: Sam Maloof, circa 1972; Maloof’s workshop, photo by Michael Stone; spindle-back chair, 1955, photo by Jonathan Pollock; from Craft Horizons, 1954; music stand, photo by Wright; maple and ebony chair, 1984, photo by Jonathan Pollock; staircase at Maloof house, photo by LA Time/Gina Ferazzi; door latch at Maloof house, photo by LA Time/Gina Ferazzi; Maloof in rocker, photo by LA Times/Gene Sasse.



Re-Thinking Saarinen: A New Eero

June 4, 2009

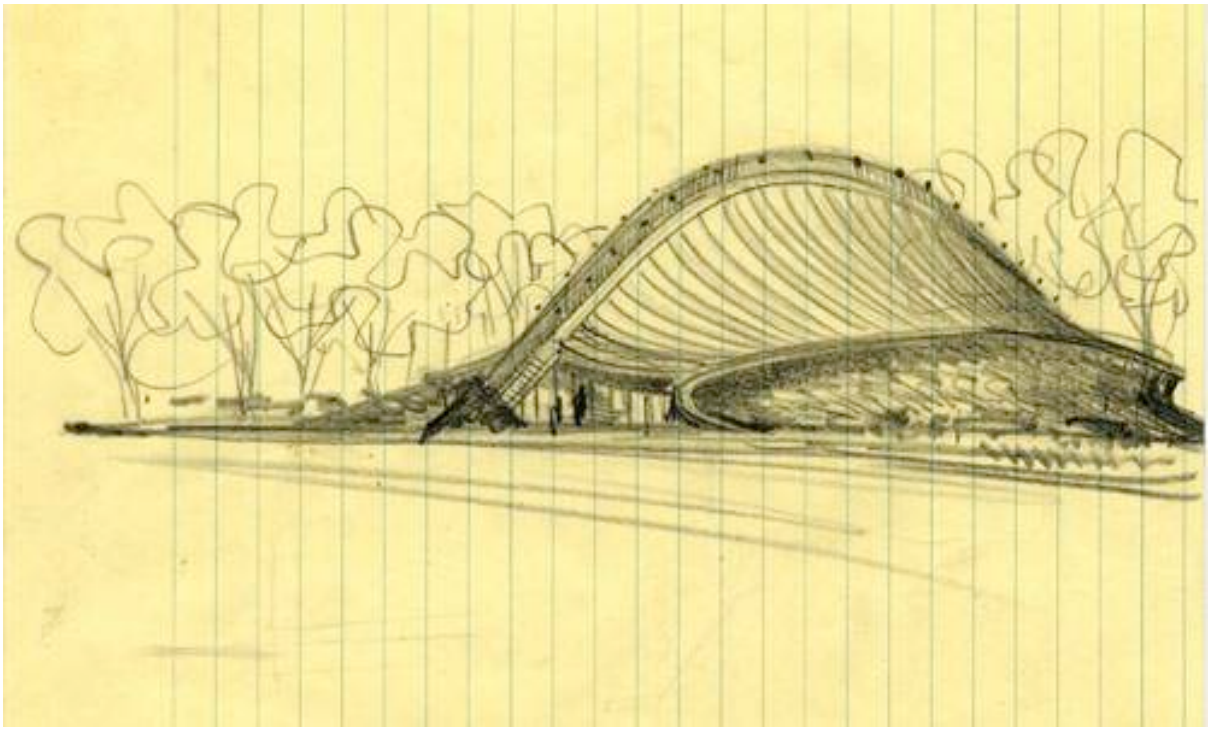
Larry Weinberg



Eero Saarinen (1910-1961) was the subject of a symposium Tuesday night at the Museum of the City of New York. The symposium was a benefit preview for the traveling exhibition, *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future*, which is scheduled to come to New York later this year. If the benefit is any indication, the exhibition will indeed make it here, as well it should given that Saarinen's works have been part of the fabric of the city for half a century. Still, nothing should be taken for granted, and anyone interested in supporting the Museum directly or with fundraising ideas should contact the Museum director, Susan Henshaw Jones.

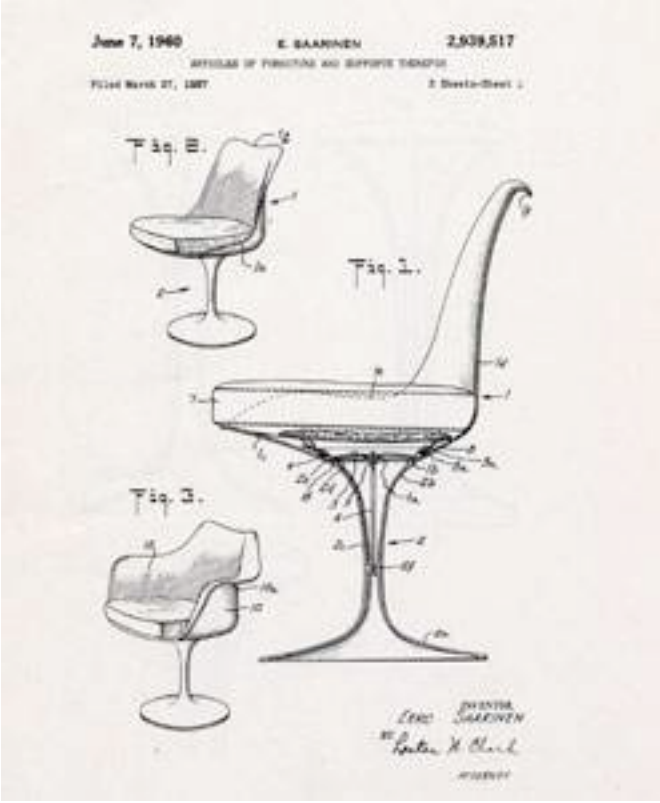
Surprisingly, given his resume and pedigree, this is the first retrospective exhibition of Saarinen's work. It is also the first scholarly study to make use of newly available archival materials. Through the exhibition and its accompanying catalog, the participating curators and writers hope to contextualize and reassess the full range of Saarinen's output, and to burnish Saarinen's reputation, which had been tarnished by criticism and neglect.

Fittingly, Vincent Scully's essay, "Rethinking Saarinen" was placed at the front of the catalog. Scully, an eminence grise among architectural historians, was among Saarinen's harshest critics (this list included Reyner Banham and Manfredo Tafuri). At the time, Saarinen was deemed an apostate and even a liability, a deviant from the



true path of modernism that seemed to lie, in America, with Louis Kahn and Robert Venturi.

Scully does not retract his criticism —he saw things how he saw them —but time has softened his views. With hindsight, Saarinen's exuberant shell structures seem less a self-indulgent dead end than a precursor to the computer-aided free-form architecture of Calatrava, Hadid, and Gehry. More pointedly, Scully now views the TWA terminal as a mediating and comforting portal between two sets of traveling tin cans, and in general acknowledges that Saarinen was more directly concerned with human use and meaning than he realized.



Seen in this way, Saarinen appears less a romantic than a humanist, his flights of individual imagination and fancy tempered by aesthetic restraint and teamwork, his designs grounded in real physical and emotional needs. In his own writings, collected in a 1962 book by his wife, Aline, and again in the present catalog, Saarinen indeed showed a measured and balanced aesthetic sensibility. Inclined to conquer gravity and soar—to create non-static, dynamic space—when the program permitted, he yet was keenly aware of the possibility of going too far. "Technology," he stated in 1957, "has made plastic form easily possible for us. But it is the esthetic reasons which are the driving forces behind its use…The choices really become sculptor's choices. But we must be aware of going too far…Plastic form for its own sake, even when very virile, does not seem to come off."

As the press release describes it, *Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future* is a comprehensive project exploring the work of one of the most prolific, unorthodox, and controversial masters of 20th-century architecture. Jointly presented by the New York Design Center, the exhibition is scheduled to open November 10 at the Museum of the City of New York. For its New York run, the show will feature a number of expanded sections, notably involving the interiors of the CBS building and the Vivian Beaumont Theater. Mark your calendars, and please consider supporting the Museum in bringing this exhibition to the city.

Images from top: Cover of catalog, Yale University Press, 2006; Eero Saarinen, photo courtesy of NPS.gov; sketch of Ingalls Hockey Rink, Yale, circa 1953, courtesy of Eero Saarinen Collection, Yale University; patent drawing of Tulip chair, 1960, courtesy of Saarinen Collection, Yale University; Kresge Chapel, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, courtesy of Ed Brodzinsky/Flickr; TWA Terminal, Kennedy Airport, circa 1962, photo by Balthazar Korab.

Barbier-Mueller at the Met

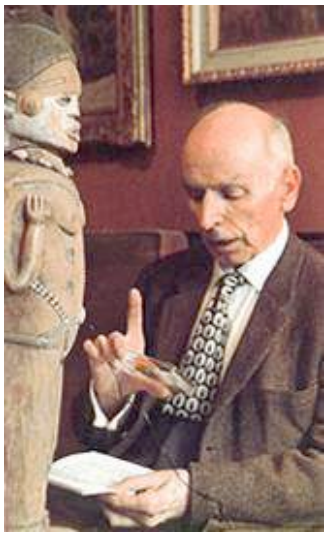
June 11, 2009

Larry Weinberg

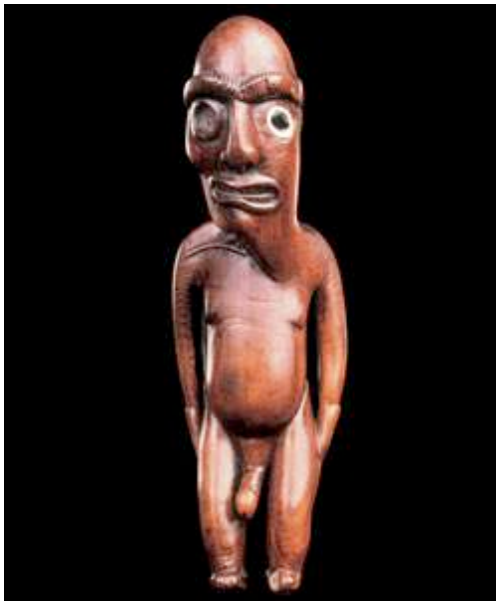
Let's start with the good news: "African and Oceanic Art from the Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva: A Legacy of Collecting," running through September 27 at the Met, is a show well worth seeing. The exhibition features 36 works—all masterpieces—from one of the world's great private art collections. Begun by Josef Mueller (1887-1974) in the 1920's, and continued by his son-in-law Jean-Paul Barbier-Mueller, the collection was placed on permanent display in 1977. The works on view range across a wide swath of Africa and the South Pacific, and they brilliantly demonstrate the virtuosity and formal inventiveness of individual creative talents.

Now for the not-so-good news: from the title to the installation to the catalog photography, the exhibition raises issues, or at least fails to resolve concerns, which make it difficult to absorb the magnitude of the works presented. Putting "A Legacy of

Collecting" in the title forces us to consider the ramifications of collecting at a moment when ethnographic art is coming under the same scrutiny as the art of antiquity. The legacy of collecting ethnographic art is increasingly being discussed as a legacy of inappropriate or questionable acquisition, if not outright looting of cultural patrimony.



While this is a complex issue, particularly in legal nuance—the UNESCO Convention of 1970 only went into effect in Switzerland in 2005, and is not retroactive—it is also a concrete and politically charged issue. A cursory internet search of "Barbier-Mueller Museum" reveals a dialogue of protest, aimed directly at the Barbier-Mueller holdings of excavated terracotta figures, but also at the depletion of African cultural artifacts in general. One such broadside, written by Dr. Kwame Opoku, spells out the damage caused by alienating tribal objects from the fabric of context, and makes a reasoned and measured claim on our collective sense of fairness.



The installation of the Barbier-Mueller pieces at the Met does little to dispel the echoes of pleas such as these. The monumental, neoclassical space which forms the backdrop, tied to the Rockefeller name, only underscores the colonial power inequities at the center of contention. The installation itself, with the objects inaccessible and captured behind glass or in glass boxes on pedestals, along with the catalog photographs of isolated objects set against solid but empty

backgrounds, serve Western eyes and sensibilities at the expense of African and Oceanic notions of context and meaning.
In a review for the New York Times last week, Holland Cotter argued that the Barbier-Mueller exhibition puts notions of “primitive” to rest and tells us that African art is not a fixed set of forms repeated verbatim, but an art of specificity and individuality. While this may be so, the same can be said of the 1996 Guggenheim exhibition “Africa: The Art of a Continent,” which made these points on a much larger scale—some 500 objects—and a more conducive stage (Frank Lloyd Wright’s idiosyncratic and expressive building).

Perhaps it is time for museums to move beyond polemics on these two points—primitivism and traditional invariance—and to more fully and directly engage the pressing topical matters of context and repatriation. As with green design, this genie is not going back in the bottle, and museums that ignore or under-represent the African perspective in tribal arts exhibitions will appear increasingly retrograde and arrogant. Go to the exhibition at the Met to see these masterpieces of art, but recognize that the Met is something of a museum of Western museology.

If you are inspired and engaged by ethnographic art, as I was at the Guggenheim show, I recommend reading any catalog published by the Museum for African Art, and patronizing that museum when it re-opens on 5th Avenue and 110th Street.

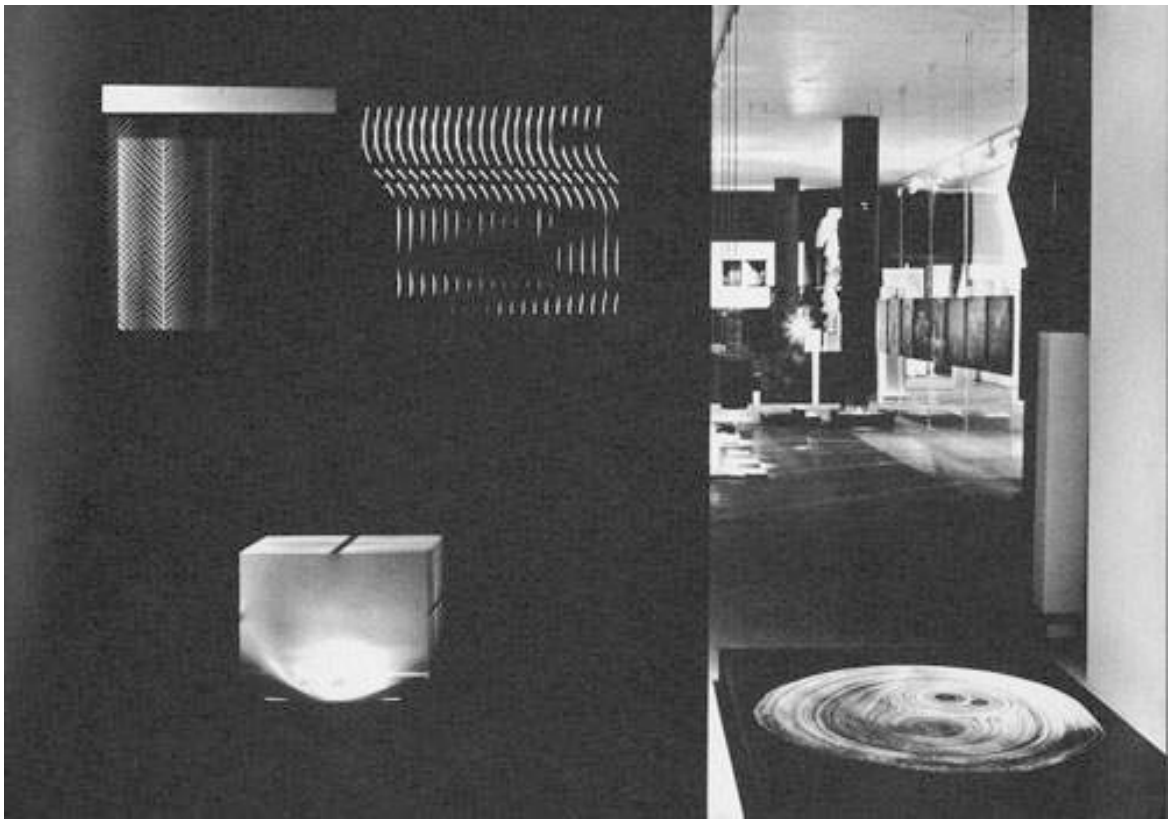
From top: Power figure, Nkisi, Democratic Republic of Congo, 18th-19th century, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; mask, Torres Strait, Saibai Island, 19th century, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Josef Mueller, circa 1967; kneeling male figure, Mali, 14th-16th century, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; male figure, Easter Island, early 19th century; female figure, northern Angola, Shinji, 19th century, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Barbier-Mueller Museum Canoe prow ornament, Solomon Islands, in case, photo by Larry Weinberg; Poro female figure, Cote d'Ivoire, Senufo, 19th century, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; funerary figure, New Ireland, 19th century, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Light Reading: A 1965 Exhibition at Harvard

June 18, 2009

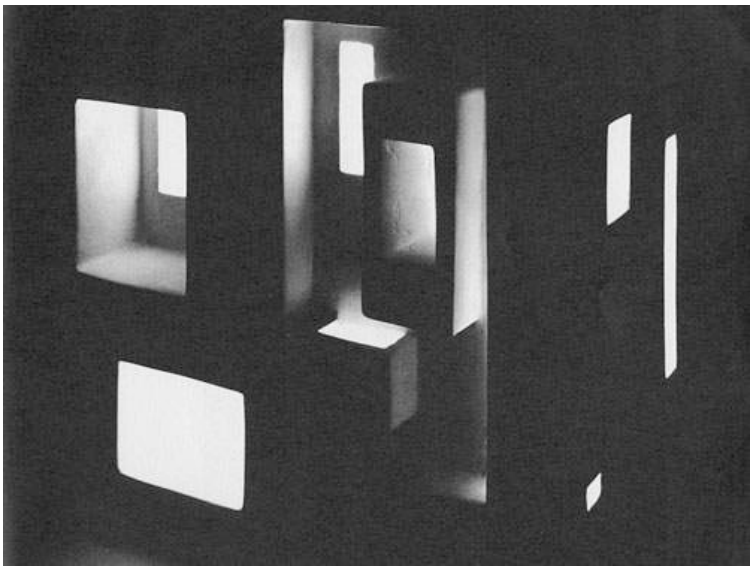
Larry Weinberg

“Everything that is seen enters the human eye as a pattern of light qualities. We discern forms in space as configurations of brightness and color. The entire visible world, natural and man-made, is a light world. Its heights and depths, its majestic outlines and intimate details are mapped by light.” So stated Gyorgy Kepes in “Light as a Creative Medium.”



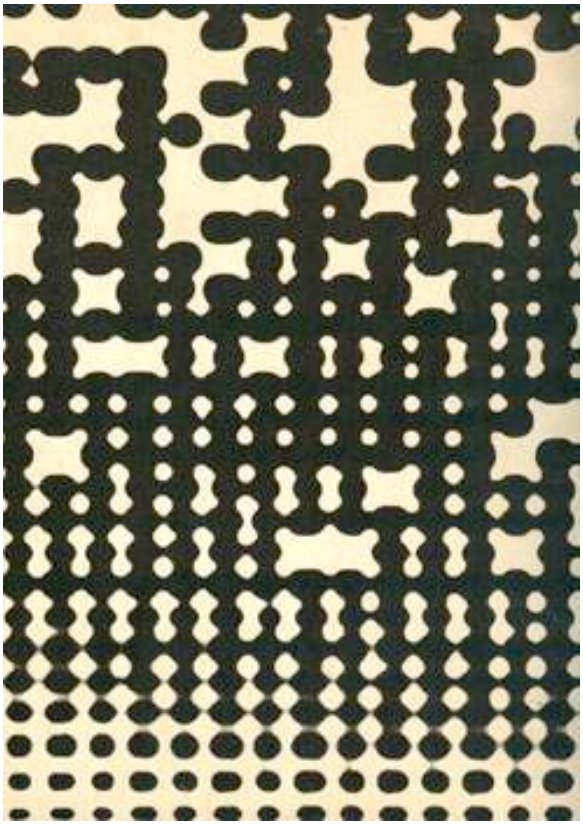
Hungarian-born painter, designer, educator, and art theorist Gyorgy Kepes (1906-2001) spent a large part of his career exploring and explaining light as a physical, cultural, and artistic phenomenon. A student of Moholy-Nagy in Europe, Kepes went on to teach a workshop on light and color at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, and later at MIT. The 1965 exhibition he planned and designed at Harvard, “Light as a Creative Medium,” is thus a summation and continuation of 40 years of work. A stated aim of the exhibition was to trace the deep and deeply historical significance of light as a central tool of art.

"There is an age-old dialogue between man and light…Our human nature is profoundly phototropic. Men obey their deepest instincts when they hold fast to light in comprehensive acts of perception and understanding through which they learn about the world, orient themselves within it, experience the joy of living, and achieve a metaphoric, symbolic grasp of life," Kepes continues.



The original language of this dialogue was fundamentally altered by the advent of the electric light, co-incident with the rise of cultural modernism and the modern city.

"In all major cities of the world, the ebbing of the day brings a second world of light…It is the world of man-made light sources, the glittering dynamic glow of artificial illumination of the twentieth-century metropolis…Washing away the boundary between night and day has lost us our sense of connection with nature and its rhythms. If our artificial illumination is bright and ample, it is without the vitality, the wonderful ever-changing quality of natural light. For the warm, living play of firelight we have substituted the bluish, greenish television screen with its deadening stream of inane images…"



This, of course, was a source of frustration to Kepes. Despite a quarter century of cultural preparation, modern artists still had not grasped the centrality or potential of light as a medium of art. As Kepes put it, artists were “afraid of light, the use of light, and the meaning of light.” This “spectrum of despair” corresponded with other perceived failures of the modernism project that were hashed out in the mid-1960’s, particularly in regard to the urban milieu. Against this backdrop of criticism and doubt, Kepes presented a call-to-arms to artists, designers, and architects, and offered a message of hope for the future:

“This exhibition is a plea…for an emerging environmental art: the creative management of light…It is an art of enormous promise. For painters, sculptors, and makers of motion pictures, a field for creative originality…

For architects and planners, a mighty tool with which to reshape our tangled, cluttered cityscapes. For the ordinary citizens of our dizzily expanding urbanized world, an aid to orientation in their surroundings.”

Author's note: In 1964, at the same time that "Light as a Creative Medium" was being organized, a young artist mounted two exhibitions in New York City galleries. Dan Flavin's first exhibition in fluorescent light, at the Green Gallery, addressed Kepes' plea for a "radiant new visual poetry" and marked a watershed in the advent of 1960's minimalist art. In the context of the Harvard exhibition, it is interesting that the minimalist movement was directly influenced by this use of light and color.

Images 1-4 from the catalog "Light as a Creative Medium" published by Harvard University in 1965; image 5 by Bernice Abbott in "Language of Vision" by Gyorgy Kepes; image 6 by Billy Jim, courtesy of Stephen Flavin; image 7 courtesy estate of Dan Flavin.

Larry Weinberg

Leslie Larson: Lighting the Way

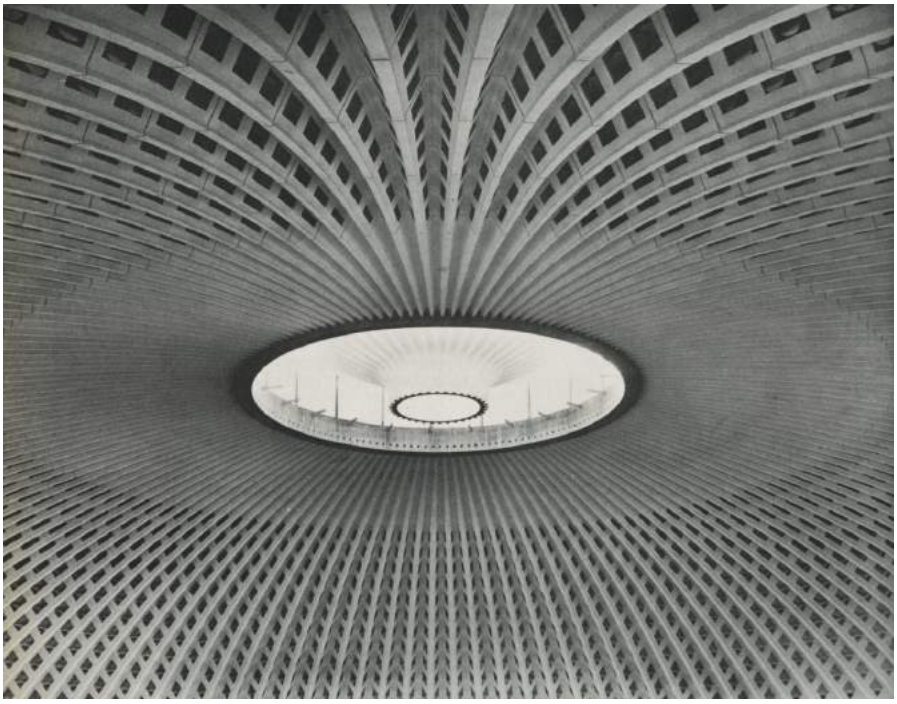
August 19, 2010

Leslie Larson, a Boston-based lighting designer and wood sculptor, began his 1964 disquisition "Lighting and its Design" with the observations that there were few well-designed lighting fixtures commercially available in America, and that architects too often neglected lighting design as an integral aspect of building. Larson himself designed both lighting systems and fixtures, and in his book, he makes a case for the importance of good lighting, and not incidentally, a good lighting consultant.

On a fundamental level, Larson points out that without light, form and space are not visible, and that the influence of light on the culture and psychology of man is too great for it to be treated mechanically. In short, lighting needs to be considered as a design problem, not an engineering one, and needs to be treated with specificity and with an awareness of both physiological and psychological needs. Beyond enabling the eye to function freely, a good lighting solution enlivens a space and addresses needs for excitement and repose, variety and even drama. Shadow and darkness, as well as natural and artificial light sources, are key elements for Larson--that the illustrations are all in black and white emphasizes this.

Larson provides numerous examples of buildings with well-handled lighting. These range from churches and cathedrals to auditoriums and offices--from the sacred to the profane. Ronchamp and the Guggenheim are singled out, neither surprisingly. Six projects caught my attention as good illustrations of Larson's argument, and beautifully lit spaces:

1. The Vasterport Church in Vallingby, Sweden, architect Carl Nyren. Natural light coming from on high creates a spiritual aura, while the wall brackets add to the drama.

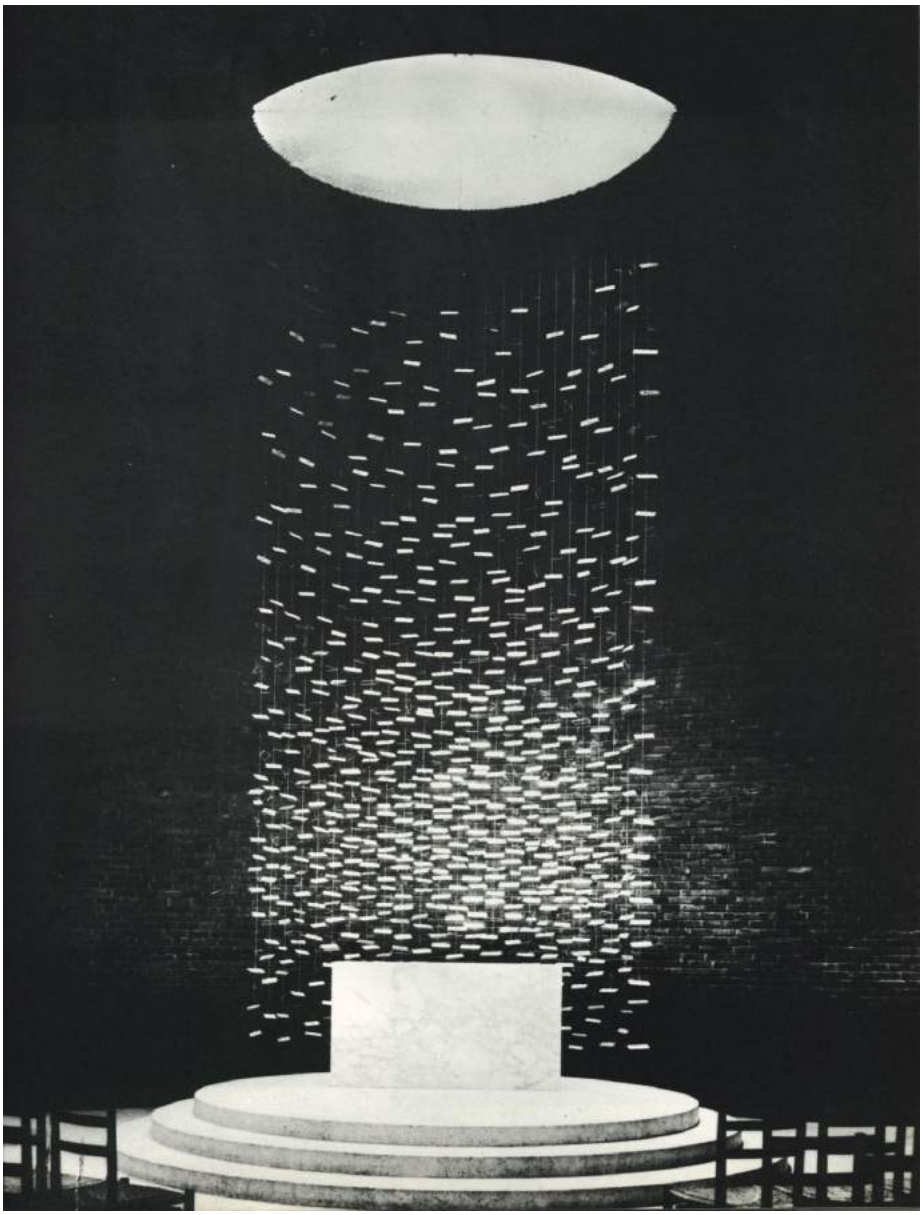


2. Dome over the Palazzo dello Sport in Rome, architect Paolo Nervi. Light and shadow define Nervi's masterwork. By day, the brilliantly lit center recess is the focal point set against the softly lit radiating ribs. At night, the dark-lit pattern is reversed.

3. Interior of the Chase Manhattan Bank in Great Neck, New York, The Architects Collaborative. A humble space that is nonetheless crisply delineated by light and shade.

4.The Olivetti showroom, NYC, BBPR architects. The contours and textures of the sand relief mural by Constantino Nivola pick up light and cast shadows; the whole is vividly outlined by cushions of light. Note also the Venini hanging fixtures, which really beg to be seen in color.

5. The St. Louis Air Terminal: Hellmuth, Yamasaki, and Leinweber, architects. Skylights at the junction points of the interlocking vaults provide natural light, while artificial lighting is placed above eye level. Light is projected upward at the surface of the vaulting, which becomes luminous in gradations.

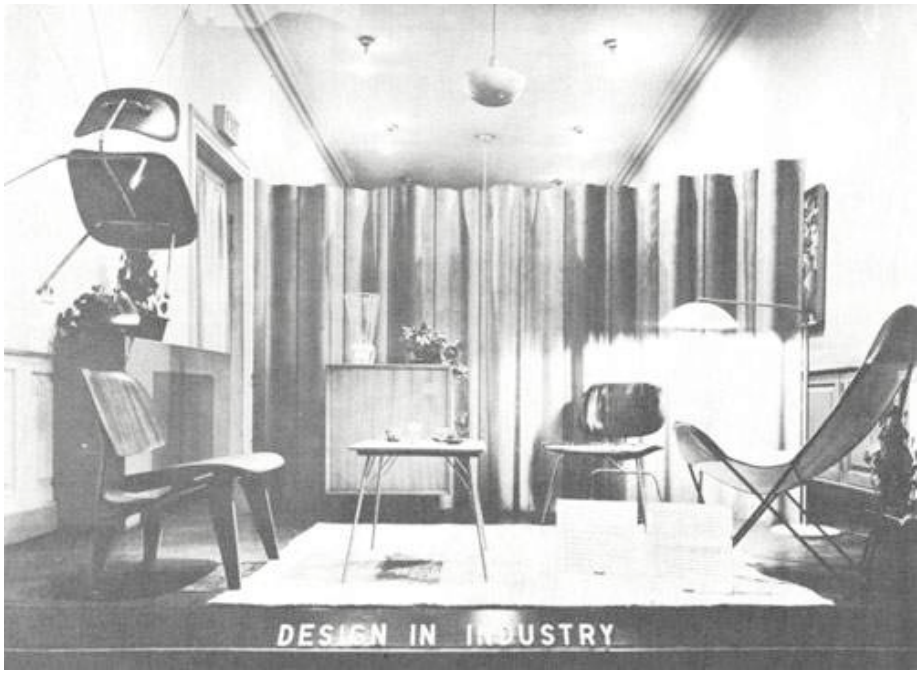


6. Kresge Chapel, MIT: Eero Saarinen, architect, with Stanley McCandless, lighting consultant. An American Ronchamp, perhaps. Poetically lit with direct light from above, which filters downward via Harry Bertoia's shimmering metal screen.

Richard Filipowski: Artist and Design Thinker

October 15, 2009

Larry Weinberg

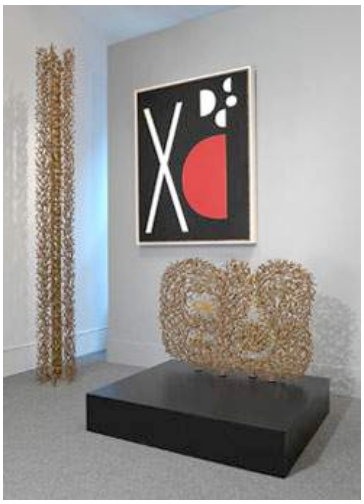


ACME Fine Arts Gallery in Boston is currently hosting an exhibition titled “Richard Filipowski: Paintings & Sculpture,” which opened September 17. Running throughOctober 24, the show features works created between 1948 and 1988, mostly sourced from the artist’s estate. It is billed as the first solo show of Filipowski’s works in the two mediums together, and it functions as a sort of retrospective. It also begs the question: Who was Richard Filipowski?

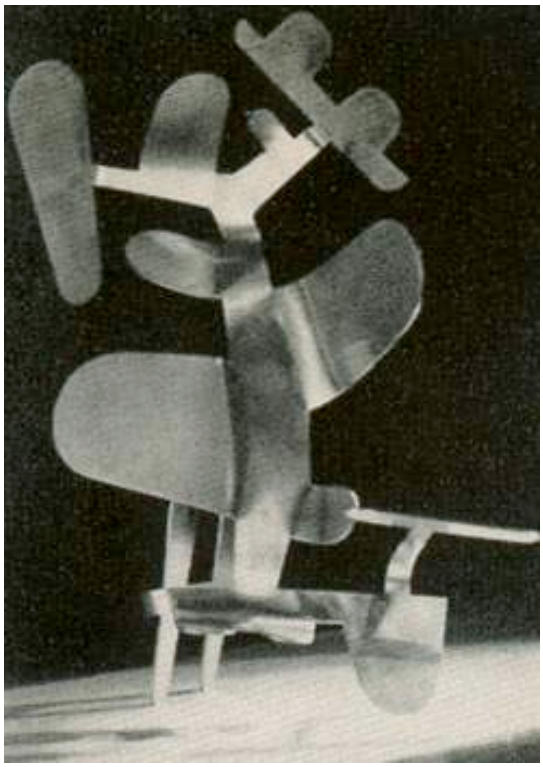
In Boston, perhaps, Filipowski might be a renowned artist and public figure. He taught visual design in the architecture department at MIT for 36 years, and in 2005, he was the subject of an exhibition at the MIT Museum titled “Finding Form: The Art of Richard Filipowski.” Outside of Boston, though, he is less well known. A brief survey of my colleagues in New York yielded no one who had heard of him. And this is a shame. Not only was he on the playing field in the art and design worlds

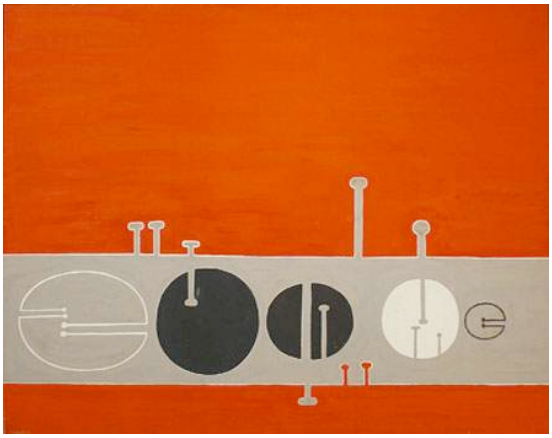
of the second half of the twentieth century, but as sculptor, painter, designer, and educator, he could have been a starting player.

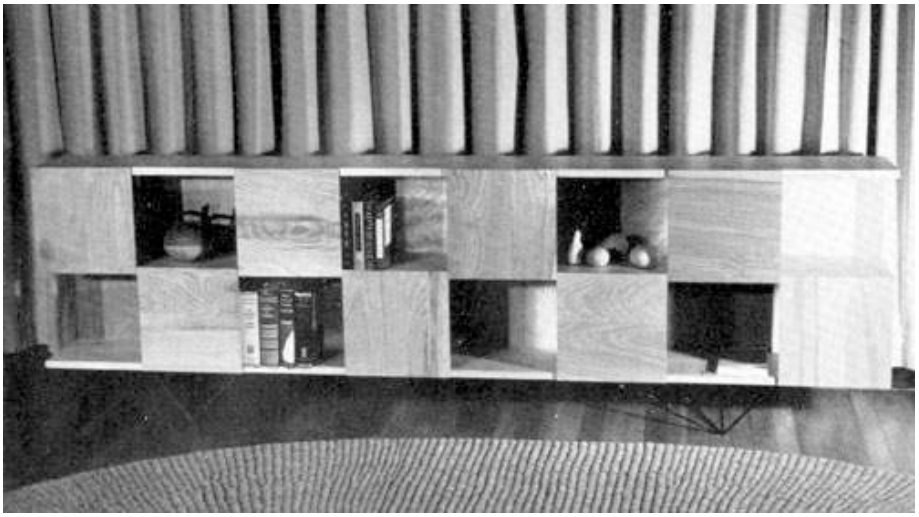
Filipowski was born in Poland in 1923, grew up in Ontario, and moved to Chicago in 1942 to study under Laszlo Moholy-Nagy at the New Bauhaus. There, he absorbed art and life lessons from masters such as Moholy-Nagy, Gyorgy Kepes, Marli Ehrlman, and George Fred Keck, as well as from fellow students such as Nathan Lerner, Charles Niedringhaus, James Prestini, Angelo Testa, and Margaret Da Patta.



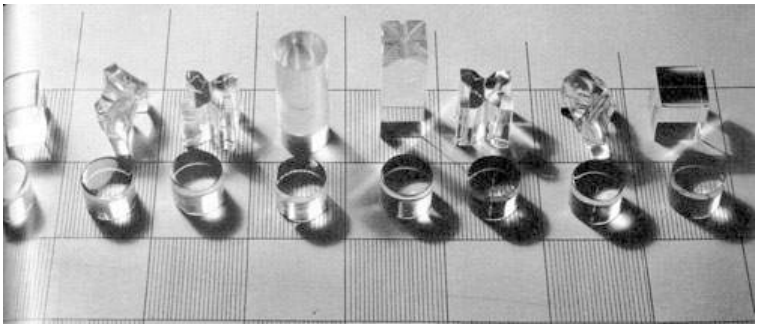
In addition to the foundation courses, Filipowski studied painting, drawing, sculpture, and architecture. Like many other early School of Design students, Filipowski's school projects found their way into Moholy-Nagy's seminal book, "Vision in Motion," as illustrations of the creative and dialectical process of education practiced at the New Bauhaus. Three examples are shown here: a "space modulator" from a 1946 architecture course; a lucite chess set from 1942, that led to a break for Filipowski when it was included in a 1947 show at New York's Julian Levy Gallery titled "Imagery of Chess;" and an aluminum sculpture from 1945 that could serve as a study for a cut plywood chair submitted by Filipowski to MOMA's Prize Designs for Modern Furniture competition in 1949.







At the School of Design, Filipowski had this to say about Moholy-Nagy: “At the bottom of the infinite faith we had in Moholy was the fact that he never criticized a student in terms of good or bad…This could have been termed simply as a teaching technique. But it really was much more. It was an expression of Moholy’s deep-rooted optimism, based on his faith in the validity of the human mind, and on his inexhaustible joy of constant discovery.”



Filipowski might equally have been speaking of himself here. Shortly after graduating from the New Bauhaus, he was invited to teach there, beginning a long career as an educator. He was also actively painting, leading to a one-man show at the Illinois Institute of Technology in 1947. He would later describe his art as a “sustained search for spatial-structural-emotional concepts.”

In 1950, Filipowski was lured to Boston by Walter Gropius, and given the opportunity to direct and develop the Fundamentals of Design program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, an extension of his Bauhaus training. He subsequently left Harvard for MIT in 1952, where he remained for 36 years, becoming Professor Emeritus in 1988. He is credited with bringing Bauhaus ideas and teaching methods to MIT, and for creating an influential and pioneering course on design theory.

Filipowski’s interest in design was deep and versatile. In 1952, he designed the exhibition “Design in Industry” (shown here) for Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art

and in the mid-50's he designed a long credenza with hairpin legs that was shown in Arredimento Moderno and other leading design journals (also shown here).
Richard Filipowski's art career is now being re-assessed; perhaps someday the rest of his work will be also.

Author's note: See my article, "The Quiet Man," in the Fall 2010 issue of *Modern Magazine* for a longer discussion of Filipowski's career.

DESIGNER SPOTLIGHT

The Quiet Man

THOUGH HE MOVED IN THE LOFTIEST CIRCLES OF MODERNISM—EXCELLING AS AN ACADEMIC, DESIGNER, AND ARTIST—RICHARD FILIPOWSKI REMAINS, UNDESERVEDLY, A CIPHER

By Larry Weinberg

38 MODERN FALL 2010

The Brief but Notable Career of Gordon Drake

October 22, 2009

Larry Weinberg

When Gordon Drake died while skiing at age 35 in 1952, he accidentally ended an architectural career that was as meteoric as it was brief. In seven years, he completed a scant dozen or so buildings, but his first two won national recognition in architectural competitions, and his reputation was such that his buildings, sketches, and writings influenced the postwar built environment, and inspired a book, “The California Houses of Gordon Drake,” published in 1956.

Born in Texas, Drake served in the Marines during WWII and moved to the West Coast when discharged. More than anything else, Drake was a California designer, working out his ideas with respect to local climate, topography, lifestyle, and mindset. As he noted at the beginning of his career, “the dominant factor in the development of California’s domestic architecture has been the…lack of a stifling formal tradition. The resulting freedom of thought has given the architect an untrammeled concept that does not exist in other parts of the country.” Drake’s contribution to this concept was a vision

of the small house, artfully sited in nature, well suited to indoor-outdoor living, and affordable.

Like many mid-century designers, Drake's first project was done for himself, and at low cost. Completed in 1946, the Drake house in Los Angeles won first Prize from Progressive Architecture in a competition aimed at raising contemporary standards for residential living. An editor noted, "Seldom does one see work in which structure, site, and clients' needs merge so completely in the process of design." Recognition was also given to Drake's next project, the Spillman House (also in LA), which won second prize in House and Garden's 1947 Award in Architecture.

Drake's first houses served as a template for his subsequent work in terms of the liberal use of timber and plywood, in the centrality of light as a design element, in the integration of natural beauty with structure, and in the simple, modular construction methods. Wood was prevalent in California, and inexpensive. Drake favored rough-hewn boards on the outside for form and texture, set off against the "magnificent sophistication of waxed plywood on the interior." Natural light was brought into the house through clerestories, glass gable ends, translucent screens, and

glass walls. Both natural and artificial light were modulated to create moods and meet use requirements.

All of Drake's efforts were intended to bring a decent quality of living to the general public, to make good design in architecture affordable. As Walter Doty noted of Drake, "He felt that architecture was without meaning until it was used. The publication of a prize-wining house meant very little unless it brought about the designing of thousands of houses…" Drake himself sought an attitude of humility in himself and his building, stating "Buildings are judged by whether or not the people who live in them are happy or unhappy."

Looking at Drake's work, one is struck by its restrained elegance, by its almost Asian sparseness and simplicity, by the beauty of its site, and by the seamless integration of indoor and outdoor spaces. Indeed, his work is its most impressive and exceptional at the liminal—the boundary—between indoor and outdoor, the precise point at which California architects embraced their zeitgeist. Most of the photos in the book stress this—doors or screens are shown open, so that outside space flows in, and vice versa. And strictly interior shots are pedestrian compared to the beauty and originality of shots involving outdoor areas—shots of houses set in their surroundings, of adjacent terraces, patios,

and gardens, of outdoor areas looking inside, or inside spaces looking out. Drake's work illustrates the new way of living developing in California after WWII. His career helped demonstrate the feasibility and even practicality of low-cost, high-quality design in domestic architecture, and expanded the sense of visual possibility in regard to indoor-outdoor living.

A Bigger and Better Noguchi

November 5, 2009

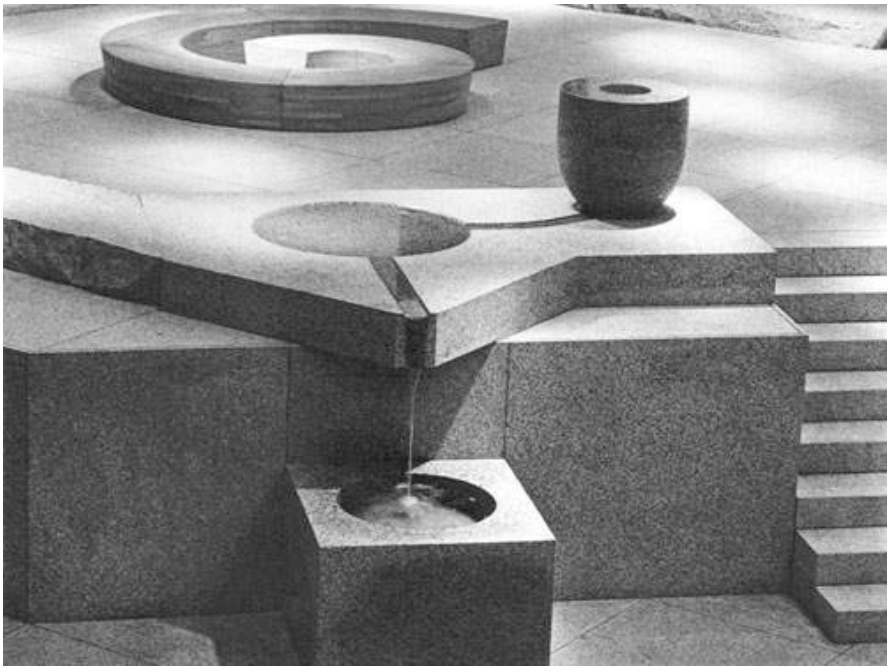
Larry Weinberg

"My effort was to find a way to link that ritual of rocks which comes down to us through the Japanese from the dawn of history to our modern time and needs." -Isamu Noguchi

First, the disclaimer: as one of the preeminent artists and designers of

the 20th-century, Isamu Noguchi has been written about extensively, and there is little I hope to add to this conversation. Still, for someone familiar with his work for at least 20 years, I was excited and inspired by a book I picked up at a thrift shop last week, Sam Hunter's "Isamu Noguchi". Published by Abbeville in 1978, this oversize book provides a stunning overview of the range and depth of Noguchi's work in a variety of media and materials, and includes a wealth of surprising visual delights. Arranged chronologically and thematically, the book draws one into Noguchi's world, tracing his development and maturation as both an artist and a human being.

The 1978 Isamu Noguchi was an extension of Noguchi's autobiography "Isamu Noguchi: A Sculptor's World" published by Harper and Row in 1968. The later book similarly benefited from Noguchi's cooperation and collaboration, featuring numerous shots of pieces from Noguchi's own collection, in addition to sketches, maquettes and notes from his archives. With superb and dramatic photographs and thought provoking text, Isamu Noguchi illuminates the artist's vision in works ranging from intimate to monumental in scale, rough-hewn to lapidary in texture, and single to grouped in spatial relation. The artist's varied career in sculpture,



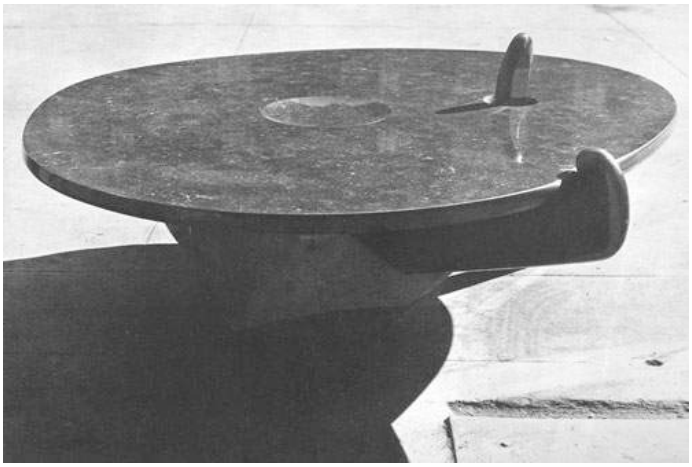
architecture, landscape architecture, theater design, interior design, and design is represented.

On the most fundamental level, Isamu Noguchi is presented as a stone carver, attuned to this material as few other modernists. As the lead quote suggests, Noguchi had an almost mystical attraction to stone, which for him presented primal, abiding, geocentric qualities. “When I tap it, I get the echo of that which we are—in the center of gravity of the matter. Then the whole universe has a resonance.” Noguchi fathomed and vested deep human meanings in his abstract stone sculpture, meanings that crossed cultural borders. After all, as Noguchi observed, “the whole world is made of stone.”

The cross-cultural nature of Noguchi’s art is, of course, another major theme of the book. As the child of a Japanese father and American mother, apprentice to Brancusi at age 23, semi-voluntary detainee in a US internment camp during WWII, and constant traveler between Occident and Orient throughout his life, Noguchi was uniquely positioned to embody and synthesize the cultural dialogue between East and West. Noguchi’s apprenticeship to Brancusi points to the complexities in this dialectic, with ideas flowing back and forth. Noguchi wrote that “Brancusi showed me the truth of materials and taught me never to decorate or paste unnatural materials onto my sculptures, to keep them undecorated like the Japanese house.”

Despite a measure of alienation in his personal life due at least in part to his divided nationality, Noguchi remained an unwavering humanist in his outlook, seeking beyond personal expression “to bring sculpture into a more direct involvement with the common experience of living…at once abstract and socially relevant.”

These desires were realized in monumental sculptures placed in relation to buildings, in playgrounds and gardens, in set designs for Martha Graham and others, in interiors, and in functional objects. The book aptly and amply illustrates these projects, and they are liberally sampled here.



To read and look at "Isamu Noguchi" is to come away with renewed appreciation for Noguchi’s creative genius —for his artistic achievements as well as the challenges he faced and transcended in life.

From top: faculty room at Keio University, Tokyo, 1951-2; ceiling and floors of 5th Ave lobby, New York, 1957; "Tenguko" (Heaven), with Tenge Kenzo, Tokyo, 1977; Playscapes, Piedmont Park, Georgia, 1976; set for Martha Graham’s "Cave of the Heart," 1946; Andre Kertesz photo of Noguchi’s studio, 1946; table for Samuel Dretzin, 1948.

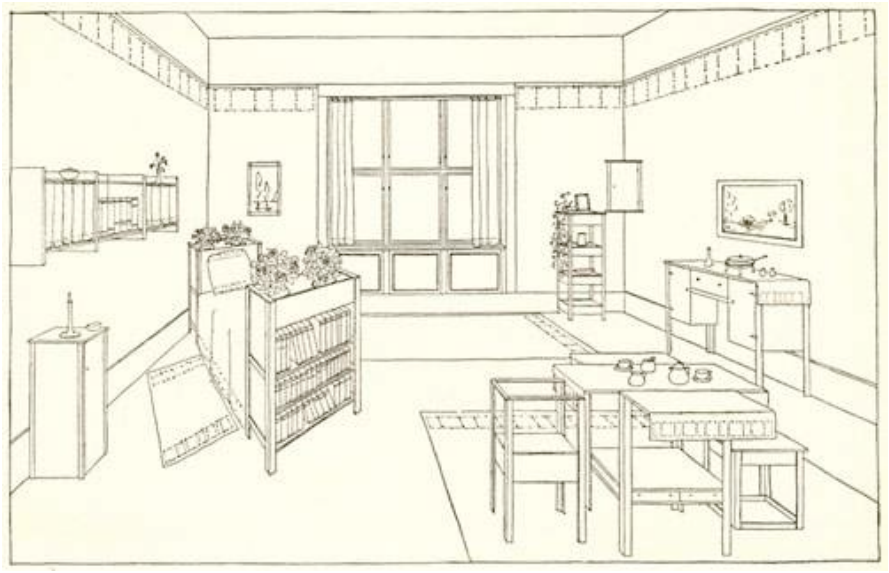
Thinking Outside the Box: Louise Brigham's Furniture of 1909

December 10, 2009

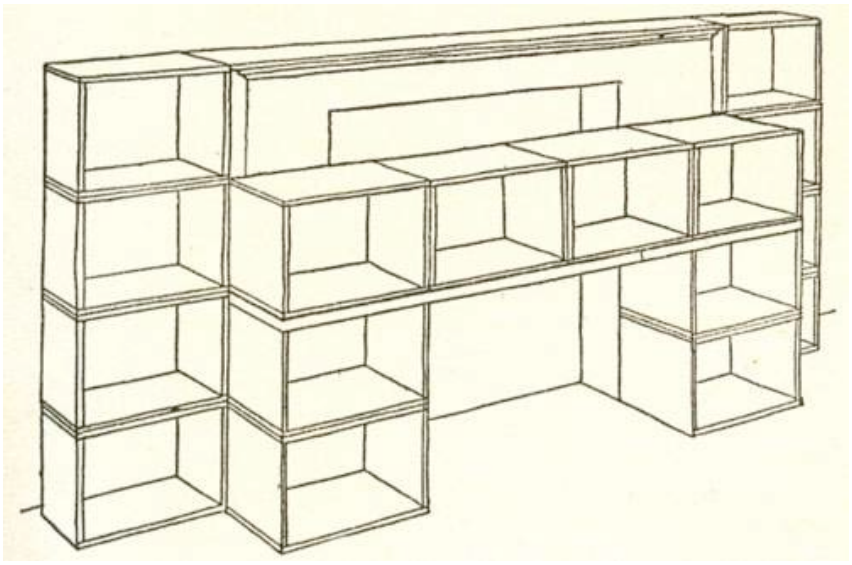
Larry Weinberg

"To all who care for simplicity and thrift, utility and beauty, I send my message." -Louise Brigham, from "Box Furniture: How to Make Useful Articles For The Home" *(1909)*

In a manner somewhat analogous to Samuel Gragg's bentwood chair of 1808, Louise Brigham's "Box Furniture" jumped ahead of its time, or, as it were, outside the box. Globe Wernecke's unit bookcases preceded box furniture, but as a comprehensive system attached to a design theory and a social agenda, "Box Furniture" appears to be the more important precursor of the mid-century's low-cost modular wall units and case pieces—in short, of much MOMA-driven "Good Design." For good measure, "Box Furniture"also anticipated the resource scenarios of Buckminster Fuller's Spaceship Earth (1930's), Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" (1962), and William McDonough's "Cradle to Cradle" (2002).



Conceptually, Brigham's book is closest to McDonough's. Brigham's self-proclaimed task is to render humble materials into beautiful and useful objects for the home. Brigham's materials are used boxes—she specifies bean boxes, canned fruit boxes, and gelatin boxes, among others, for projects ranging from cupboards, desks, and chairs to planters and music stands. Beauty may be in the eye of the beholder, but there is no question that "Box Furniture" exhibits simplicity, thrift, and utility. However derivative the Mission or Secession-derived styling of the furnishings appears to us today, the concept behind it is much in vogue —repurposing as a key step toward sustainability. In 1909, in America, scant attention was paid to this issue. As *The New York Times* reported, "Box Furniture" might "be taken as one of the few indications of the birth in this country of a tendency toward less wastefulness of raw materials." Interestingly, in the preface to the book, Brigham locates the genesis of "Box Furniture" at a base camp 700 miles north of the Arctic Circle—a frozen tundra where there were boxes (from delivered provisions) but no trees. What is interesting is that Brigham sensed a need to paint this scene at the outset, to project "Box Furniture"into a situation of resource scarcity, as if



this were the best (or only) way to gain attention and acceptance. Despite protestations that box furniture “can be used with artistic effect in the homes of wealth and culture,” the rationale for “Box Furniture” aligned more with domestic conditions of relative deprivation, i.e. with workers’ houses, schools, and hospitals.

Indeed, Louise Brigham was a progressive era activist, artist, and social worker with experience in the settlement house movement. She was versed in the gospel of service, citing Jacob Riis and “How the Other Half Lives” as a particular influence. Inevitably, “Box Furniture” was tinged with the aura of paternalism that characterized these efforts.

The Copenhagen Sideboard, Closed and Opened

Brigham’s educational platform, for example, speaks more to vocational training than art education; it is more about keeping boys (and girls) off the streets than about cultivating a generation of designers or design conscious citizens.

Still, despite such Progressive-era baggage, “Box Furniture” contained forward-looking concepts: affordability, the use of humble materials, unit or modular design, and participation would all figure into the design cosmology of the mid-century, while repurposing, as mentioned above, is today a highly topical issue. Part of this forward push involves the box itself. Chapter titles like “The box taken partially apart so that it loses its original shape” and “The box taken entirely apart and the material used in

construction" point toward the radical achievement of de Stijl architecture—the deconstruction of the box. In its simplest form, as with the fireplace bookcase for the boy's room (pictured here), box furniture has a Loosian austerity and geometry that anticipates Rietveld's later crate furniture and the modular box furniture schemes of the resource-challenged 1970's. Even with Mission styling literally tacked on, the box has still been deconstructed and reconstituted; the underlying concept is still visible.

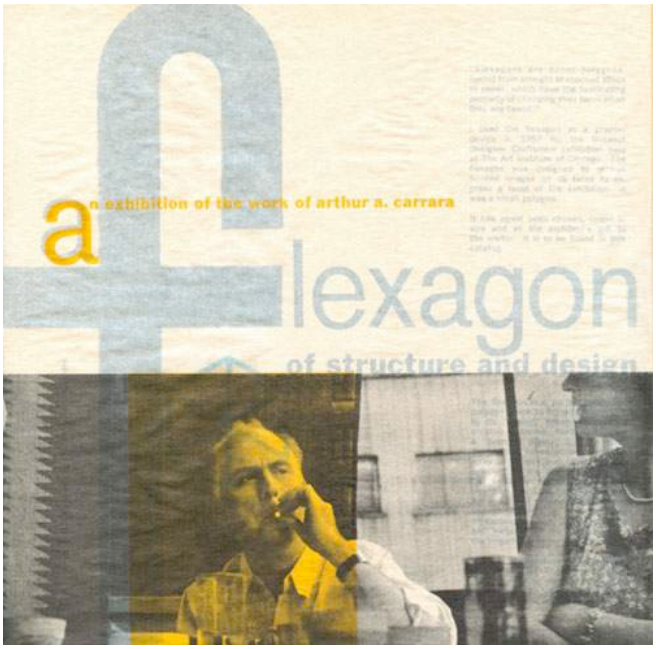
Brigham mentions Holland and Germany as two of the countries she visited to spread her ideas. Could "Box Furniture" have been in the mix with Frank Lloyd Wright's Wasmuth Portfolio of 1910 as an American influence on post WWI European modernism?
Author's note: Thanks to Jessica Pigza for *The New York Times* quote. See her post about "Box Furniture".

Arthur Carrara: A Paragon of Creativity

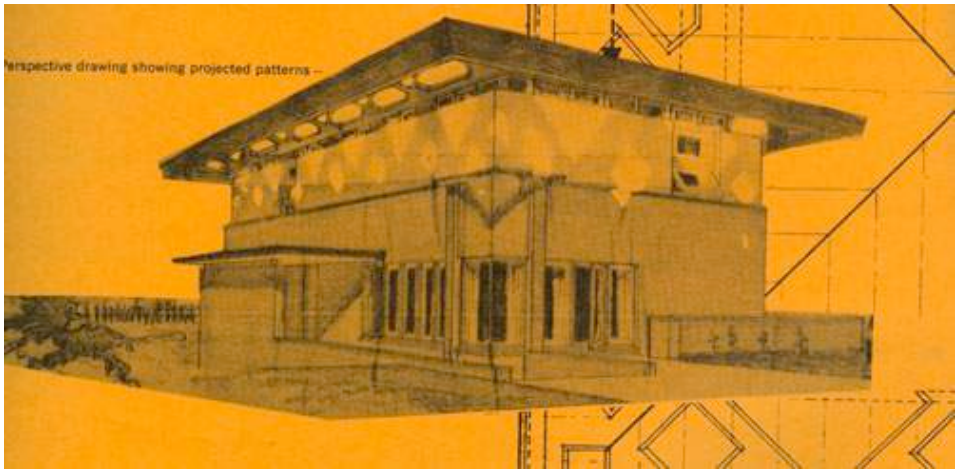
January 7, 2010

Larry Weinberg

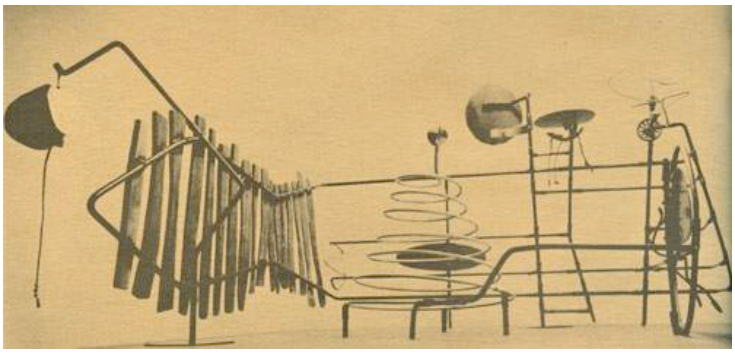
Arthur A. Carrara (1910-91) was a Chicago-based architect and designer whose work channeled Prairie School and modernist influences, from Frank Lloyd Wright to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Buckminster Fuller. But for a stint in the Army during WWII, he remained based in Chicago, designing private houses, corporate offices, exhibitions, and industrial products. Unfortunately, his name is not offhand familiar today, and his work is largely off the



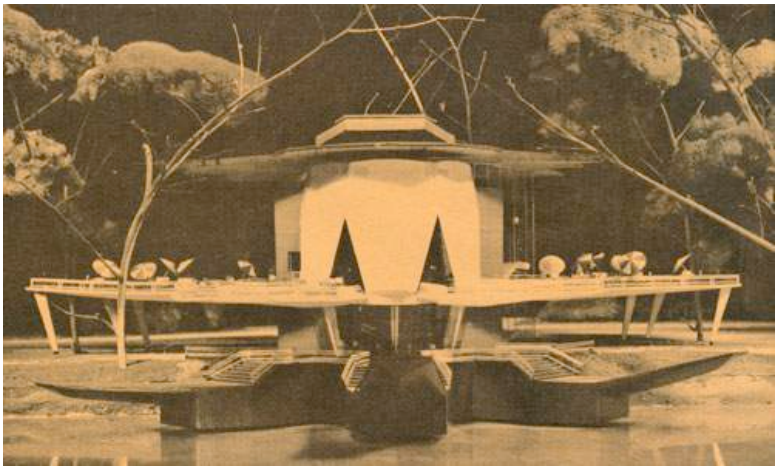
radar. Fortunately, his idiosyncratic career was showcased in a retrospective exhibition circulated by the Milwaukee Art Center in 1960, and preserved in a graphically arresting though largely unobtainable catalog.



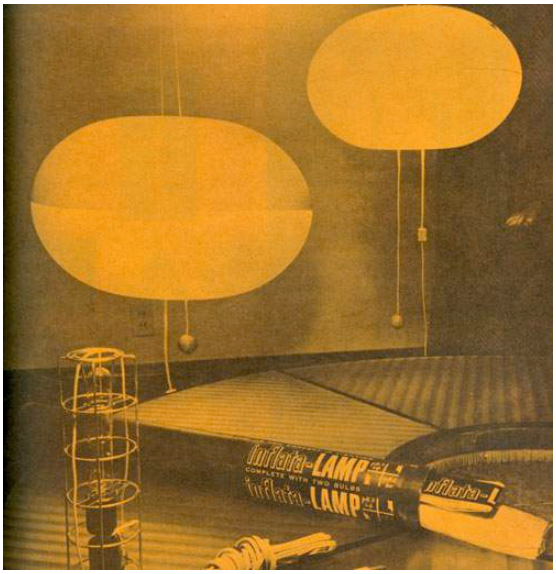
Titled “A Flexagon of Structure and Design: An Exhibit of the Work of Arthur A. Carrara,” the catalog provides a window into a fascinating and experimental body of work and thought.



As pictured here, this work includes *Magnet Masters*, an architectural toy promoted by the Walker Art Institute and featured in “Everyday Art Quarterly;” *Café Borranical*, a model for a building incorporating hydraulic moving sections; a low-cost “keel chair” of stapled fir plywood; a model of a play sculpture submitted to a MoMA competition; a house designed for Edward Kuhn that projects a changing pattern of shade ornament; and a plastic “Inflata-Lamp,” described by the author of “The Inflatable Moment: Pneumatics and Protest in ‘68” as the first inflatable object for the home.

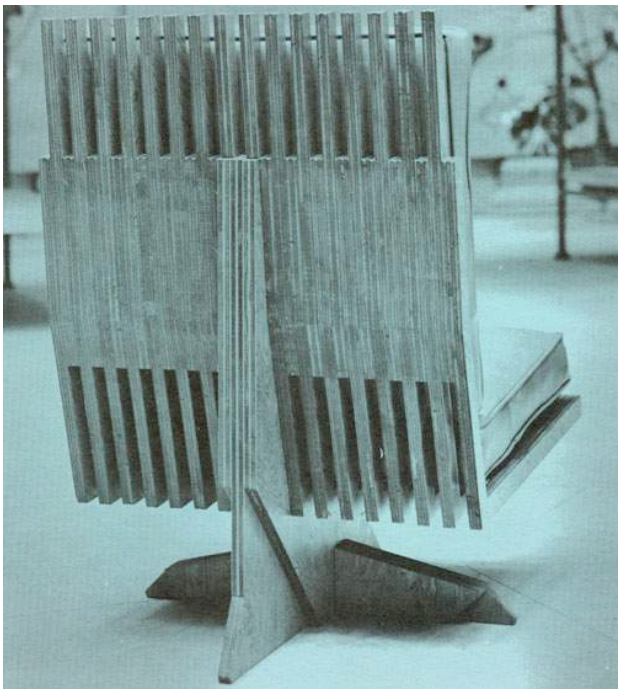


As titular symbol, the flexagon carries particular meaning for Carrara. Discovered by a British mathematician in 1937, flexagons “are paper polygons, folded from straight or crooked strips of paper, which have the property of changing their faces when they are flexed.” Sort of a 3-D kaleidoscope-cum-origami, the flexagon expresses creative potential for Carrara, possessing, in his words, the qualities of “mystery and precision.” This combination of attributes—mystery and precision—describes Carrara as well, suggesting a mind capable at once of mathematical logic and wonderment.



It is not surprising, then, that Carrara designed toys and play structures, and that the fulcrum of his work was imagination, play, fancy, and fun. As he said in writing about *Magnet Masters*, “every idea of man is first emphasized as a toy or in a toy.” Toys and play structures elicit creativity itself, introduce architecture and design as participatory acts, and embody notions of sculptural plasticity and motion. Unfettered creativity, plasticity, and motion are key elements of Carrara’s mature work, uniting his earliest and latest efforts, and his toys and buildings. In this regard, the Kuhn house takes on the aspect of a kaleidoscope and the *Café Borranical* that of a flexagon. *Magnet Masters* was suggested in “Everyday Art Quarterly” as a teaching tool for children of all ages—graduate art students included—while electromagnetism was imagined by Carrara as a method of building joinery.

Perhaps the lack of exposure makes Carrara's work appear fresh today, or perhaps his take on things is simply refreshing. If you are fortunate enough to get hold of a copy of "Flexagon" you can judge for yourself.

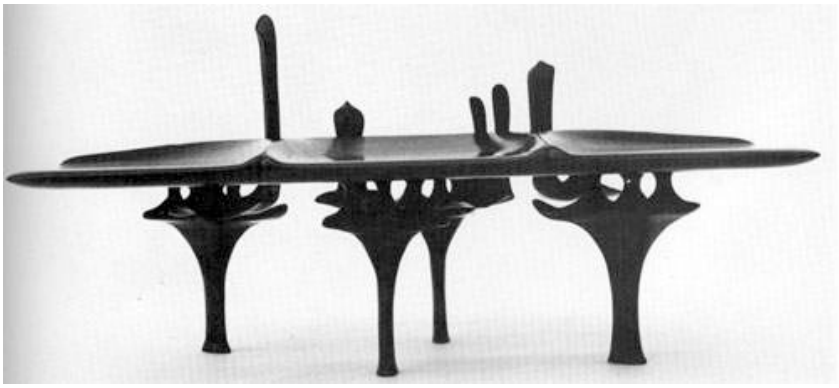


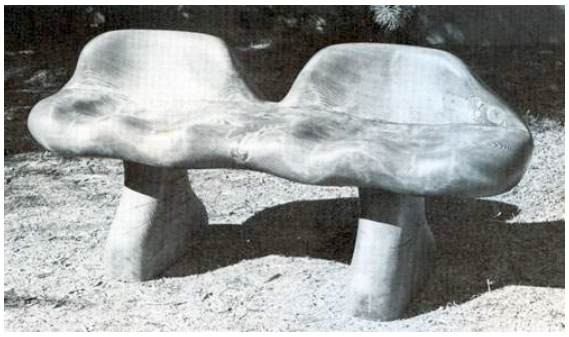
Dona Meilach on Modern Wood Furniture
January 28, 2010

Larry Weinberg

Dona Meilach (1926-2008) was a seemingly indefatigable connoisseur, champion, and chronicler of craftsmanship. All told, she wrote over 40 books and several hundred articles on a broad range of craft topics and techniques. A glimpse at some of the titles —"Creating Art from Fibers and Fabrics," "Creating With Plaster," "Papercraft," "Collage and Assemblage,"—speaks to the encyclopedic breadth of her interests, as well as the depth of her knowledge: she not only studied but also performed the crafts she wrote about.

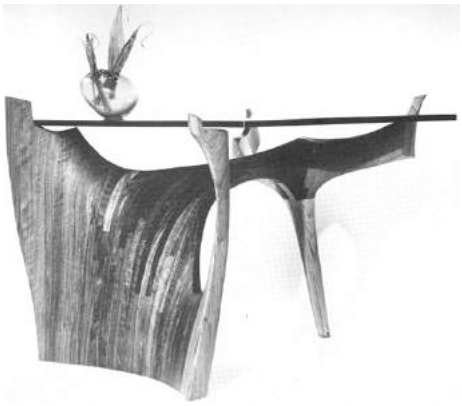
Her tactile, scholarly, and catholic approach enabled her to deeply understand the craft movements of her era (1960-80's), and to grasp the tendencies and elements that were significant and innovative.



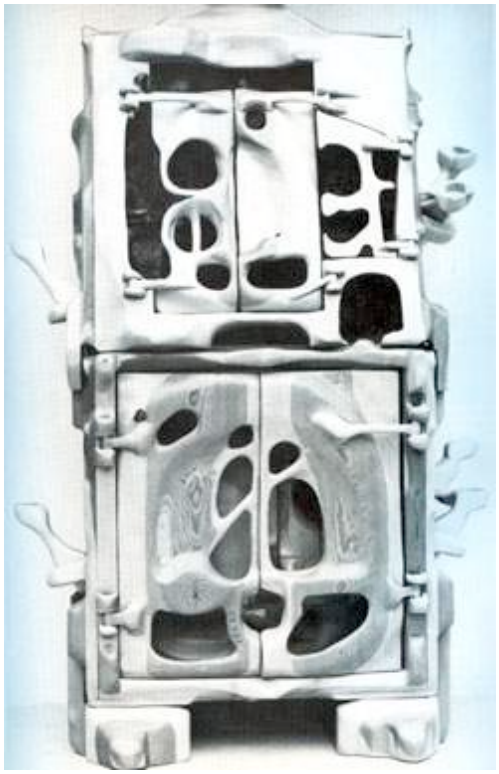


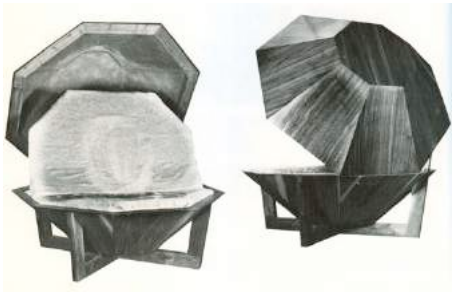
In my library, I have three of Meilach's books: "Contemporary Art With Wood" (1968); "Creating Modern Furniture" (1975); and "Woodworking, the New Wave"(1981). Along with "Creating Small Wood Objects as Functional Sculpture" (1976),these works form as good an introduction to postwar craft woodworking as exists. Part how-to guides, part visual encyclopedia, these books provide both detailed technical information and lavishly illustrated curatorial information.

"Creating Modern Furniture" is the focus of the present post. Subtitled "Trends, Techniques, Appreciation," it provides an overview of the craft woodworking movement of the mid-70's, featuring 580 photographs, mostly of works by a multitude of American artisans. The first part of the book describes woodworking techniques and praxis, including sawing, sanding, grinding, joining, gluing, finishing, and veneering. Trees, wood, lumber, tools, and even work area and safety are discussed.



As interesting as this is, the book's value lies in the examples that are shown—Meilach had a truly great eye for innovation and beauty. With hindsight, the book contains work by the usual suspects, who may or may not have been usual suspects at the time.





This list includes Michael Coffey, Gary Knox Bennett, Jack Rogers Hopkins, J.B. Blunk, Wendell Castle, Mabel Hutchinson, Jere Osgood, George Nakashima, Wharton Esherick, and John Makepeace. The standout here for me is Jack Rogers Hopkins, a California artisan who worked in laminated, steam-bent woods. I've included an image of an installation with a grandfather's clock and a dining table, and a close-up of the dining table, which to me is the most stunning object in the book. Meilach cites Hopkins for virtuosity, and notes that the interaction of the various wood colors in the table (teak, maple, and birch are used) adds to the total sculptural concept.

Beyond the dozen or so artisans who have become household names in the design market, there are a few dozen more with similar talent, and here the book becomes a guide to future collectability. A few of the more eye-popping works, shown here, include a low table of

African Padouk wood by Joe Barano (“a marvelous interplay of sculptural forms”); a coat tree and lounge chair by Edward Livingston; a double love seat of fir by Robert Dice; a “Clam” chair of walnut with fur and leather interior by Edward Jajosky that closes on itself; and a door by sculptor and jewelry designer Svetovar Radakovitch that includes surprises such as inset chunks of colored glass and cast bronze hinges. As striking as these pieces are, they do not even figure in the chapter “Fantasy Furniture,” which includes a surreal-looking chest of drawers in a mélange of woods by Denis Morinaka and a cabinet with doors-within-doors by Ann Maimlund, both pictured here.

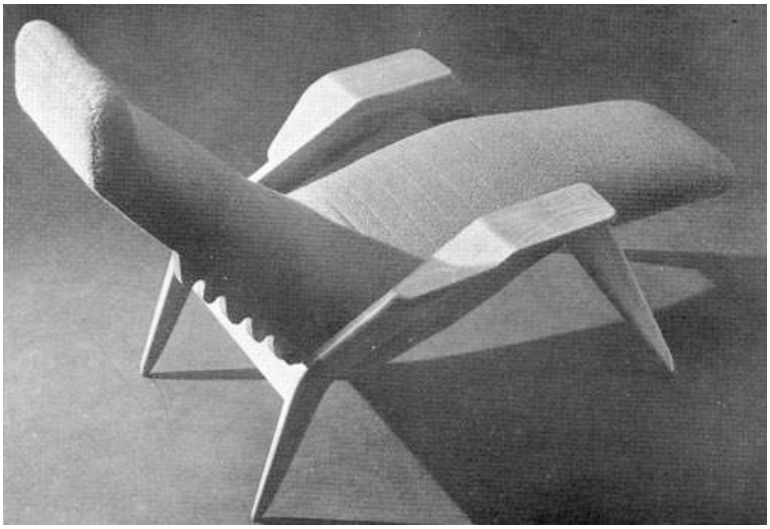
Goldfinger on British Design
April 8, 2010

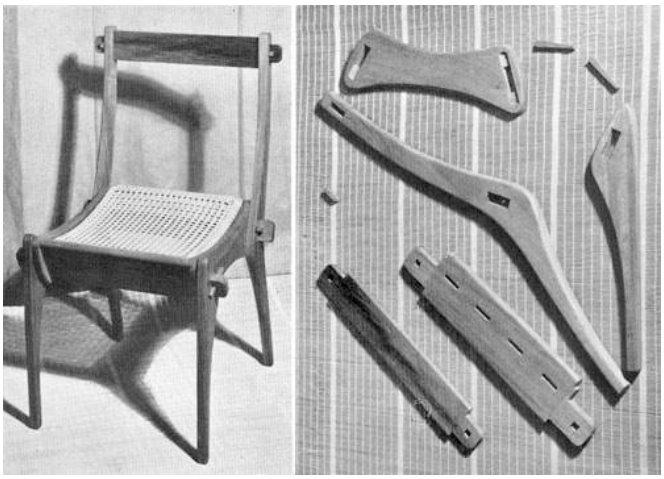
Larry Weinberg

Sorry, that would be Erno, not Auric. Born in Hungary, the modernist architect and furniture designer Erno Goldfinger (1902-87) moved to Paris in 1921, where he fell under the sway of Perret, Mies, and Le Corbusier. He moved to London in 1934 after marrying Ursula Blackwell, heiress to the Crosse and Blackwell fortune. The modernist scene Goldfinger encountered in Britain was conservative and stodgy compared to America and continental Europe. Sans Gropius, Breuer, and Chermayeff, all laid over in

England pending transit to America, it might even have flatlined (apologies to Welles Coates and Betty Joel). A comparison of "The Studio Yearbook," a British publication, and "Domus," the Gio Ponti-edited Italian publication, bears this generalization out visually. So too does the direction of the modern design market. In furniture and lighting design, at least, technical, stylistic, and conceptual innovation apparently skirted the British Isles. The Festival of Britain, held in 1951—exactly one century after the Crystal Palace Exhibition—was, like its predecessor, both an acknowledgement of cultural deficiency and a concerted effort to improve the situation.

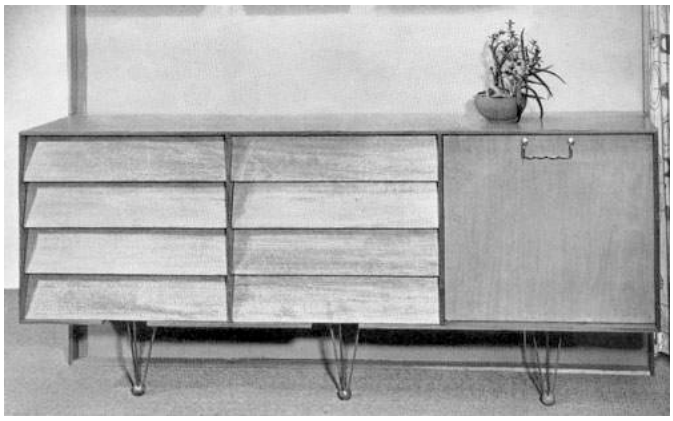
Still, it would be polemical to call early postwar British design moribund. Erno Goldfinger's "British Furniture Today" was published in 1951, and it shows a pulse to British modernist design prior to the impact of the Festival. Goldfinger reserved the cover for his own table, but whatever his merits as a designer—and I like the table on the cover—he was a perceptive and discriminating editor. His small and slim volume (5 inches by 7.5 inches by .5 inches) includes future icons by Ernest Race (the Antelope chair) and Robin Day (the so-called Festival chair), as well as the Saarinen-inspired shell chair by Dennis Young, Breuer's plywood lounge for Jack Pritchard's Isokon, the popular Stack-A-Bye chair of tubular steel and sheet metal, and the unit case series by Robin Day and Clive Latimer that won first prize in a 1950 MoMA low-cost furniture competition.





The value of Goldfinger's book lies beyond these touchstones, however. A high percentage of the examples in the admittedly short book show what I would regard as dynamic and even edgy modern design. Goldfinger's text, oriented toward rational, ergonomic, low-cost, mass-produced precepts (note that Goldfinger was commissioned to design offices for the *Daily Worker* newspaper and the British Communist Party headquarters) belies the expressive, joyously sculptural character of many of his selections.

Among the little-known pieces of avant-garde modernism identified by Goldfinger are the following, illustrated here: a radically curvilinear lounge chair with cutaway arms that channels Finn Juhl or Carlo Mollino by Neville Ward and Frank Austin; a slightly less radical wing chair in tune with the just-published work of Vladimir Kagan; an elegant and progressive-looking adjustable reclining chair, maybe Royere meets Kagan, by Clive Entwhistle for Design Research Unit; a demountable wooden chair along organic design principles by the design group Arcon; a garden seat in wood by the design historian and theorist David Pye (subject of a future post) that resembles the tradition-inspired modernist work of Charlotte Perriand or Clara Porset; a graphically interesting, Knoll-looking sideboard on hairpin metal legs by Ian Bradbury; and a stabile-like adjustable floor lamp by B.M. Schottlander.



Unfortunately, the pieces illustrated here, as well as most of the other interesting pieces shown by Goldfinger, failed to reach a large audience. I can't think of many examples on the market today or even in the past decade. Perhaps more exposure to these pieces would lead to a renewed appreciation for early postwar British design. As it is, Goldfinger's book points to the presence of young design talent in England, and provides a snapshot of a nascent cultural flowering, even if that flowering wasn't realized until the mid-1960's.

For the record: after a conversation on a golf course with a cousin of Ursula Goldinger's, Ian Fleming named his Bond nemesis. Erno was not amused.

Illums Bolighus: The Store and the Catalog

April 15, 2010

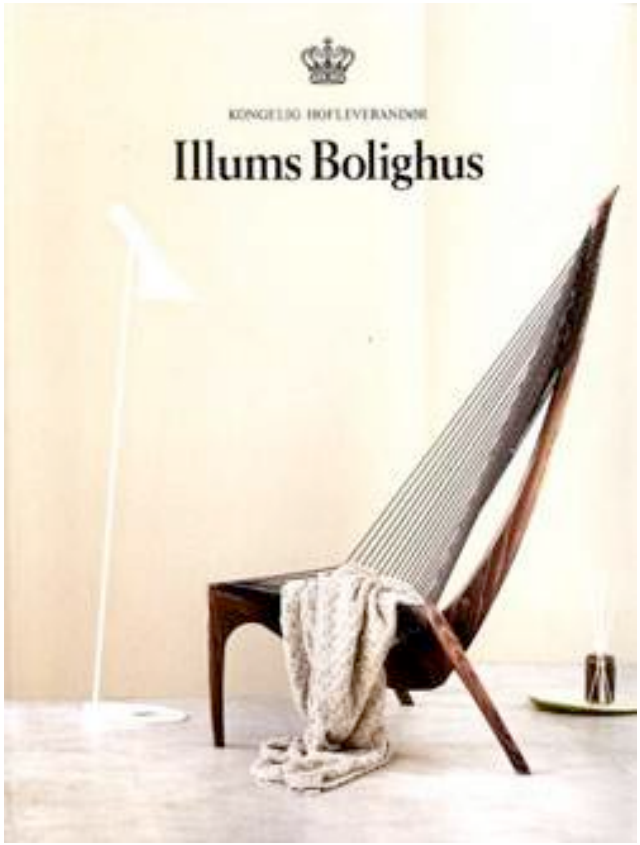
Larry Weinberg

The name Illums Bolighus has been synonymous with excellence in modern design for much of the past century. The emporium founded by the Danish businessman Kaj Dessau in 1925 became the leading entrepot of Danish modern design after the war, and one of the world's great stores. Kaj's aesthetic vision, executed in collaboration with his artistic consultant Brita Drewson, involved creating designed interiors, vignettes pulling together textiles, furnishings, and art in room settings. Innovative at the time, this approach became a best-practice marketing tool for modern design in Europe and the Americas. By the 1960's, Illums Bolighus was an influential trend-setter in the modern design markets, and a destination for shoppers interested in modernist furniture, accessories, and art.

In 1961, Illums published a now famous and much-coveted catalog, "Illums Bolighus: Center of Modern Design." Small at 6.5" x 5.5," with sturdy teak covers, the catalog was intended to reach American and European audiences for mail-order business, but often inspired buying trips to the design mecca itself. Oriented toward pieces capable of

disassembly—for easier shipping—the catalog nonetheless reads like an encyclopedia of Danish modern design. Classics from masters such as Finn Juhl, Hans Wegner, Poul Kjaerholm, Borge Mogensen, Arne Jacobsen, Greta Jalk, Nanna Ditzel, and Niels Vodder share space on the pages with works by lesser-known designers such as Kurt Osterig, Hans Olsen, Rosengreen Hansen, Frode Holm, Erik Worts, Folke Ohlsson, Karl Ekselius, and Ebbe Clemmenson. Simple, practical tables, chairs, chests, and bookcases are offered along with icons such as the Chieftan chair, the 45 chair, the Ant chair, the Swan chair, the Papa Bear chair, and the Spanish chair. Adding international flavor and cachet are a few works by Bruno Mathsson, Gio Ponti, and Marco Zanuso.

The 1961 Illums catalog stands on its own as a valuable introduction to postwar Danish design, depicting a cross-section of furniture designs and offering a gold mine of curatorial information. Organization by type—chairs, sofas, chests, coffee tables, dining tables, hutches, etc—makes it easy to “look up” pieces you are researching, and the photos are supplemented with critical information including designers, materials, and measurements. The catalog in my collection includes tipped in the April, 1962 price list, which tells us that a Finn Juhl Chieftan chair in oxhide sold for $231.00, a Wegner drop-leaf table was priced at $139.00, and a Jacobsen ant chair went for $12.50.



Shown here along with a photo of the teak-bound Illums catalog are three scans from the catalog: a Finn Juhl desk, a Harbo Solvsten easy chair, and an interior vignette featuring an Egg chair. Also shown is an interior shot of the Illums showroom in 1965, courtesy of Flickr. Together, these images provide a sense of the style and visual excitement associated with Illums.

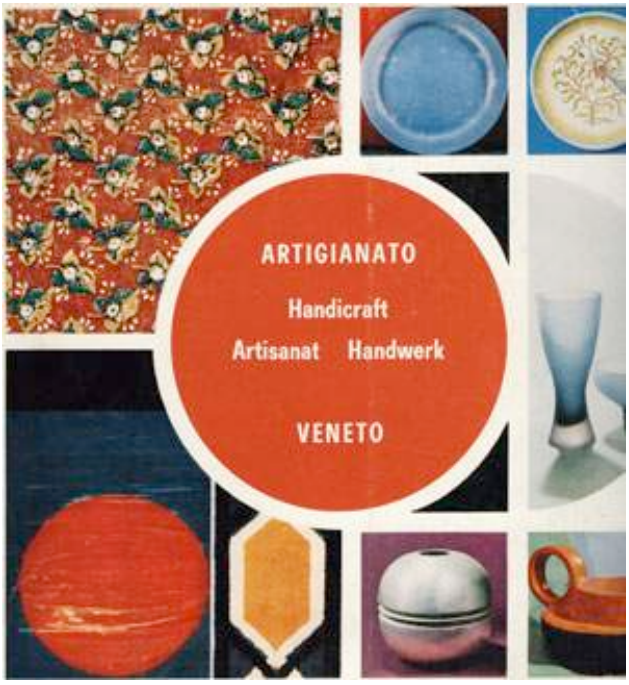
Illums Bolighus is an ongoing and thriving business, having opened branches at the Copenhagen airport, Tivoli Gardens, and Arhus. It remains a factor in the design market, promoting interesting new designs such as the rocker shown here by Carlo Volf (2007), but a glimpse at the cover of any recent Illums Bolighus catalog—for example the one with the harp chair and Jacobsen lamp—also shows the company's sense of its own history and desire to perpetuate a legacy of design savvy.

Modern Venetian Handicraft

April 22, 2010

Larry Weinberg

Last week, Venice hosted a Design Leadership Summit that brought together a few hundred design leaders from the United States to discuss things that design leaders discuss. I was not invited, nor did I get a T-shirt. I did, however, find a book (in Brooklyn) called "Artigianato Veneto," or Venetian Handicraft. Published in 1971, the book showcased recent work in fields such as glass, metal, ceramics, jewelry, wood, lace, printing, and textiles, while also tracing the traditions and history of these crafts as practiced in Venice.

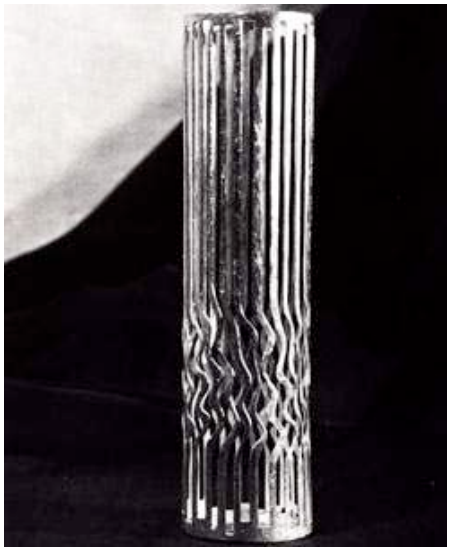


The timing of the book suggests a civic purpose in terms of celebration and promotion. Being planned at the time was the seminal exhibition of Italian design to be held at MoMA in 1972 under the title "Italy: The New Domestic Landscape." More to the point, held the year before, in 1970, was an exhibition in Milan called "Milan 70/70" that was both a retrospective of

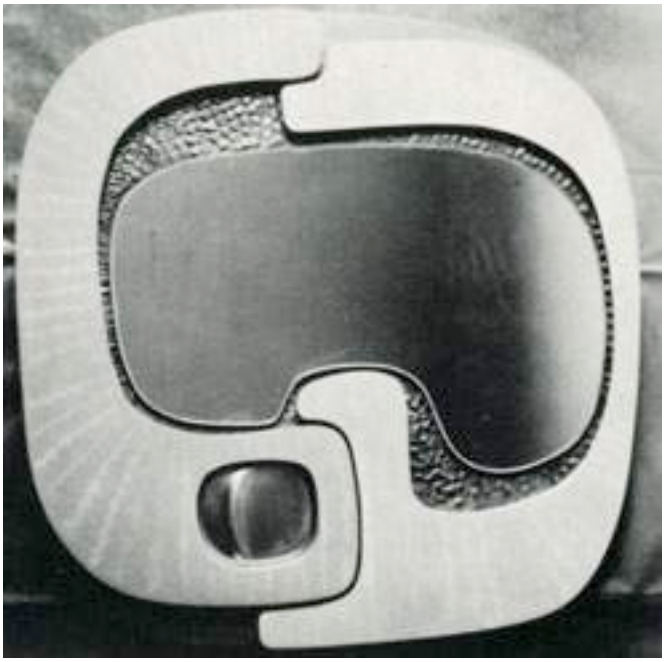
a century of design in Milan and a celebration of a decade that elevated Milan to the center of the design universe. For all its glorious craft traditions and modernist achievements, Venice was probably feeling like a second city, and “Artigianato Veneto” was probably an attempt to redress this imbalance while promoting Venetian crafts to the world (the text was printed in English, French, and German, as well as Italian).

Tradition and history are a source of civic pride, and the region around Venice, which includes Verona, Padua, and Murano, has a rich history of artisanship, manufacture, and trade. These histories are referenced for each of the crafts discussed, but the thrust of the book is forward-looking, toward the mid-20th century and beyond. How else could Venice respond to Milan’s indisputable leadership in conceptual, utopian, and anti-design? How else to compete with Joe Colombo, Vico Magistretti, Gae Aulenti, Achille Castiglioni, Flos, Artemide, and Kartell, but with a handicraft rooted in a glorious past yet creating a sort of beauty organically linked to the present? It is worth noting that plastic—both symbol and medium of 60’s avant garde Italian design—is not even mentioned in “Artigianato Veneto.”

What is mentioned, and what occupies the largest section of the book is, of course, glass from Murano. The catalog here shows masterworks of modernist glass in both technical and artistic capacity. Richly illustrated with works by Venini, Barovier, Seguso, Toso, Vistosi, Salviati, Barbini, and Martinuzzi, the glass section alone commends Venice to the attention of modern design enthusiasts, though the greater works are of mid-century rather than late 60’s origin. Shown here are vessels by Aureliano Toso and colorful turkeys by Venini.



Beyond glass, the book shows children's furniture in wood by Gigi Sabadin, pottery and ceramics "in modern shapes" by Gastone Primon and Marisa Sartoretto, and a ceramic sculpture by Federico Bonaldi, very much in a late 1960's idiom. Still, it is the metal work that catches the attention as the region's second most interesting modernist craft. Padua shares the spotlight here with Venice, as it was home to Paolo de Poli, the enamalist who collaborated with Gio Ponti on a famous series of enameled animals, pictured here. Also shown is a fretwork silver vase by Andreina Rosa, a mirror with a zinc and lead frame from Artigiano Peltro, and a gold necklace by Atelier des Orfevres. Thrown in for good measure is a vignette of scarves by Tiziana Carraro.



Forty years later, the 60's design from Milan remains conceptually compelling and, not incidentally, marketable. The best work produced in the Venetian region during this period, if less radical, still looks important and fresh, and as for marketability, I see a trip to Venice in my future. Hear that Leadership Committee?

Larry Weinberg

Geek Before Chic: Richard Wright and the 1999 Eames Auction

May 13, 2010

Before the Italian sale, before the Louis Kahn house, before the $500,000 Noguchi coffee table, and before branded luxury, there was the Treadway/Toomey Eames auction held on May 23, 1999. For Richard Wright, who curated and produced the auction, this represented a point of departure from Treadway, where he had worked for a number of years, and an early collaboration with Julie Thoma Wright, his wife and business partner-to-be. For the market, the auction represented a succession of firsts: first all-Eames sale; first Ray Eames splint sculpture to be offered for sale; and first catalog without a logo on the cover, with the title running across two pages, and with photos bleeding across pages. Soon after the Eames sale, Richard founded Wright, his eponymous auction house, which has since become a force in the modern design and art markets, elevating Richard to first-tier status as a market-maker and connoisseur. In the spring of 1999, however, Richard still worked with Treadway, and his future plans were still on the drawing board.

The Eames auction would give Richard a chance to show what he could do, both for himself and for the design world. Over a period of two

years, Richard assembled a collection of Eames material, reflecting his own interest and belief in the work of Charles and Ray. Highlights included the well-edited Breeze-Stewart collection; a trove of Eamesiana from an estate sale of a distant Eames relative that Richard said he was proud to handle; and the fluid Ray Eames splint sculpture, important for both aesthetic and historical reasons—it helped put Ray's contribution back into the equation. Early designs, production variations, and prototypes were featured. The auction was pitched to collectors, and timed to coincide with a major Eames retrospective opening in Washington, D.C.

At the time, assembling this material for a dedicated sale was a bold step, but no more so than re-thinking what an auction catalog could look like. Working with Julie, hiring a graphic designer out of pocket, and micro-managing practically everything, Richard wound up pushing the boundaries of auction catalog design. The finished product would become a template for his later, more polished efforts, which, in turn, would provoke change in catalog design at the larger auction houses.Wright's timing, as it would often be, was impeccable. Collector interest in the Eames' work ran high, supported by renewed attention from shelter magazines. Recent reproductions from Modernica and Design Within Reach added publicity, without yet cluttering the field. The tech-fueled economy was booming.Eames collectors were—and probably still are—an obsessive and determined bunch. In the late 90's, we (guilty) shared a sense of discovery, not just of the Eames oeuvre but of a body of exuberant and innovative work that was American mid-century design. Still, the greatest enthusiasm was reserved for things Eames. People who otherwise, and later, would champion Line

Vautrin, Paul Evans, and Ado Chale, spent inordinate amounts of time rhapsodizing about zinc screws, rope braids, screw-in feet, and early Evans labels, and speaking in shorthand—DCW, ESU, 670 ottoman in rosewood with down fill. Technical and chronological details mattered, a lot.

The sale whipped this crowd into a frenzy. The results surprised even Richard. One hundred percent of the lots sold, with many achieving stunning prices—a child's chair brought $15,000 (try repeating that now), a lot of letters from Charles to the Saarinens brought $5,000, and a slunk skin plywood chair in pristine condition brought $35,000. Nothing, however, topped the whopping $130,000 commanded by the splint sculpture, on an estimate of $25,000-35,000.

The success of the Eames auction solidified Richard's position in the design community. More, it gave him the courage and the means to start his own business. Looking back at the catalog and the sale, Richard is amazed—amazed perhaps by his audacity of concept and design, or perhaps by his subsequent run of success. The ripples from the Eames sale would help transform the market for mid-century design, as other auction houses scrambled to gain a share of this increasingly lucrative sector. Last month Richard revisited this idea with his second all-Eames auction. Unfortunately, the centerpiece lot—the Neuhart archive of Eames ephemera—estimated at $150,000-$200,000—was withdrawn due to a contest over title. As Richard noted, it's hard to go home again.

The Modernism of Lina Bo Bardi

June 10, 2010

Larry Weinberg

"The most important thing [in architecture] is not to construct well but to know how the majority of the folk live." -Lina Bo Bardi, 1975

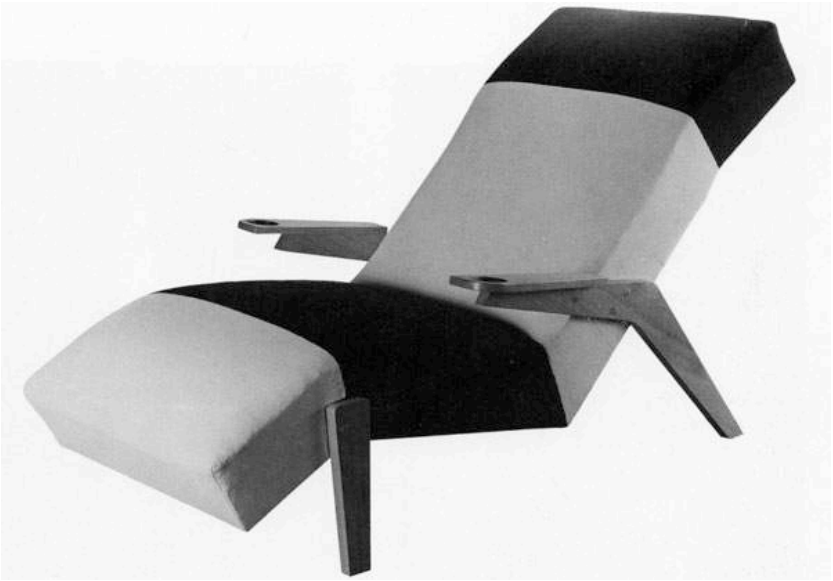
Lina Bo Bardi (1914-92), the Italian/Brazilian polymath, remains an under-appreciated modernist architect, designer, and thinker. The reasons for this surely include gender—as a woman, she was overshadowed by Niemeyer and Costa, and by Rodriguez and Tenreiro. Also, a lavishly illustrated treatise published in 1993 by the Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi is written in Portuguese, and a perceptive article from 2002 is in the Harvard Design Magazine, neither of which sit on many American coffee tables. Of her architectural projects, The Glass House (1951) and the Sao Paolo Art Museum (1957-68) are perhaps known, as is the Bowl Chair (1951) among her designs. The rest is ripe for rediscovery and reevaluation.

It is tempting to see Bo Bardi as a hybrid flower, transplanted from Italy to Brazil, where she blossomed in the unfettered and lush environment, trading an early Corbusier for a mature Frank Lloyd Wright as an avatar, shucking the encroaching formalism of the International Style for a direct and unencumbered engagement of local needs (both material and psychological), customs, topography, and materials. In short, as a proponent of the sort of dynamic and organic modern architecture advocated by Bruno Zevi, with whom she edited a journal in the mid 1940's. Zevi, an Italian Lewis Mumford, opposed neo-classicism, reductionism, and a priori thinking and embraced, a la FLW, an architecture style oriented toward space and the life taking place within that space. To Bo Bardi, the rain forest/wilderness held a promise of creative liberation: "Brazil is an unimaginable country, where everything is possible." Bo Bardi's thoughts about the Brazilian zeitgeist, quoted above, points in this direction.

The problem with this notion is that Bo Bardi was pretty much full-grown before she left for Brazil. She possessed a degree in architecture, was well-versed in Italian rationalism, influenced by early Corbusier, and by the design agenda of Gio Ponti, for whom she worked and edited. Tossing Zevi into the mix makes for a complex mix. On some level, Bo Bardi absorbed and internalized any number of conflicts within avant-garde modernism. Her career in Brazil probably represents a working through of these conflicts rather than any

resolution of them-abandoning a priori thinking is easier said than done.

Five of the six images shown here illustrate this. The Glass House, built as her own residence in 1951, is obviously less William Wurster than Mies or Philip Johnson. The early photo of the house, sans flora, shows a sort of Farnsworth House on pilotes--a glass box plunked down on the edge of a rain forest. That Bo Bardi replanted and intended the rain forest to grow back around the house makes little difference-the photo has its own visual and historical reality. The second image, with the house hidden amidst the flora, casting ever-changing reflections, is closer to the Johnson Glass House of 1949, and more in the direction of the dynamic/ explosive/regional, providing that the rainforest was allowed to grow back naturally and chaotically (as opposed to the planted, pruned, mowed, and over-determined landscape at the Johnson House). The overall impression is of an International Style goldfish bowl, a holding tank for acclimating to a new environment.



Similarly, the two furniture designs shown here, while very much of their moment synchronically, are less specific in terms of place. Either one could have been designed and produced in Italy-the chaise of 1948 is reminiscent of Ponti in its shape, the planes of the arms, and two-tone graphic character of the upholstery, while the Bowl chair of 1951-a rationalist hemisphere atop a circle and four lines-could have been done by Roberto Mango. Unless the bowl represents a coconut shell, there is little connection to Brazil. More connection is seen in the Casa Cyrell of 1958, with its thatched roof, local ceramic shard-laced cement walls outside, Santos inside, and profuse vegetation everywhere.

All this only suggests that Bo Bardi, like Corbusier, like Frank Lloyd Wright, was a complicated figure. Any reassessment of her career needs to apprehend this. Her story, as it continues to emerge, will shed light on a number of Big Themes in the history of design and architecture--gender, politics, philosophy, aesthetics, housing and so on.

Mexican Modernism: The Next Big Thing
August 12, 2010

Larry Weinberg

Pedro Friedeberg at Reyna Henaine in New York

There is considerable reason to think Mexican modernist design will gain traction in the American market. Simple proximity to the United States, an indigenous tradition of craftsmanship, exotic materials, an expatriate community of designers, Marxist politics, and wealthy local patrons all point to a period of creative combustion ready to be rediscovered by market makers ever-hungry for new material. A 2006 monograph on Clara Porset, a 2007 museum show in Mexico City accompanied by a 566 page catalog entitled "Vida y Diseno en Mexico en Siglo XX," and a recent monograph about

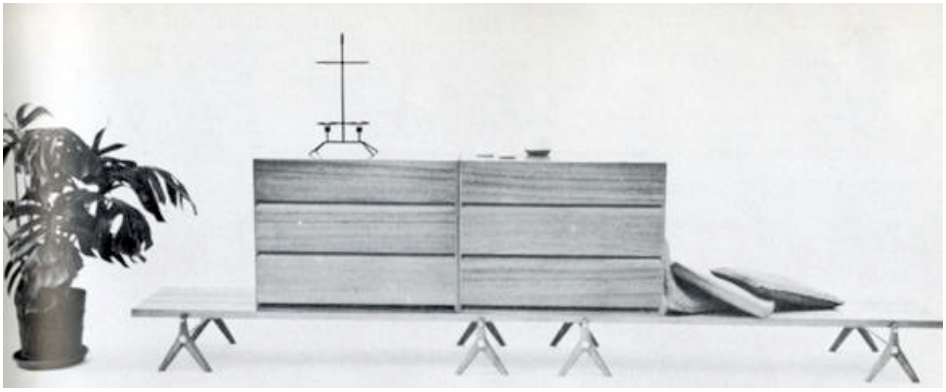
Emiliano Goyod

Pedro Friedeberg, have raised awareness and piqued curiosity, while providing the basic scholarship that helps fuel sales.

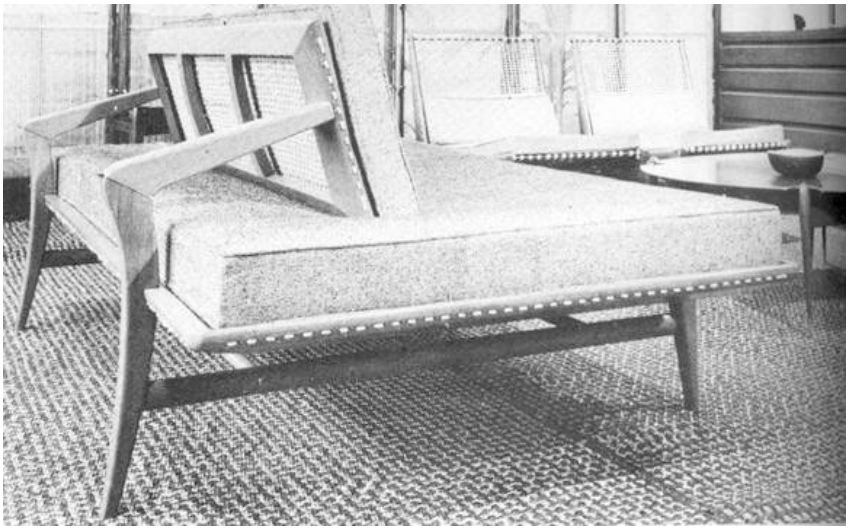
Looking through "Vida y Diseno" it is easy to understand the appeal of Mexican modernism. Much of this well-edited and lavishly produced book is eye candy. The pieces in it appear familiar but with a twist; the sensation is like seeing undiscovered works by Gio Ponti or Charlotte Perriand. Mid-century standouts include a wood and tubular steel chair by Bauhaus-trained Mathias Goeritz, a decorative tiled table by Juan Cruz Reyes, a solid and naturalistic coffee table by Don Shoemaker, an "Equipal" chair by Pedro Ramirez Vasquez, and any number of works by Arturo Pani, Michael Van Buren, Clara Porset, or Pedro Friedeberg. Notable recent works include the sustainable furniture of Emiliano Goyod and Hector Galvan. The book reads like a who's who, and figures to become the standard reference (and buyer's) guide to Mexican modernist furniture.

Not included in "Vida y Diseno" is the work of Charles Allen and Edmund Spence. This is because both are American, and neither lived in Mexico. Spence made a career out of translating international modern styles for the U.S. market--he designed a successful blonde wood line made in Sweden and imported by Walpole Furniture of Massachusetts. Spence's Mexican venture, dubbed the "Continental-American Collection," was launched by Industria Meublera in 1953. A contemporary ad boasts "superb raw materials [and] fine Mexican handcraftsmanship," and shows an Aztec stone deity apparently putting his imprimatur on three chair designs.

Somewhat less commercial, and more elegant and sophisticated, is Charles Allen's line for Regil de Yucatan, imported by Yucatan Crafts--think Robsjohn-Gibbings does Tulum.



An interior designer and muralist turned furniture designer, Allen was an aficion of the native woods and natural finishes found in Yucatan. His rakish, saber legged chairs and daybeds were hand crafted of solid mahogany, and woven with local sisal, while his case pieces incorporated machiche, grenadilla, and bajon woods in addition to the brass rods holding together the distinctive saw-horse bases. All finishes were hand-rubbed. In describing the collection in a 1952 article, design writer Gladys Miller enthused that it "fits perfectly when placed in the contemporary, casual but orderly and disciplined home." Maybe Allen really did do his homework--the Mayans were nothing if not orderly.



Arguably, both Allen and Spence are susceptible to charges of cultural imperialism for appropriating stylistic elements and utilizing cheap labor and cheap, even endangered materials. Still, in terms of recognizing the design potential in Mexico's cultural mix, and introducing Mexican-made modern furniture into the American market, Allen and Spence were well in the vanguard of a growing movement. As the market for Mexican modernism develops, look for blue-chip status to be conferred on certain designers, as with Brazilian design in the past decade. Look for the top galleries and auction houses to continue to offer up these names, and to dig deeper into the Mexican modern heritage. And look for Charles Allen's mid-century designs at your local thrift shop, before these too are scooped up.

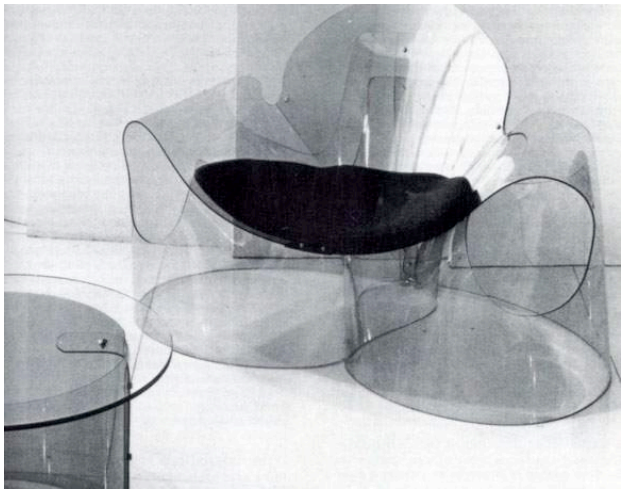
Trois Decennies of French Design

August 26, 2010

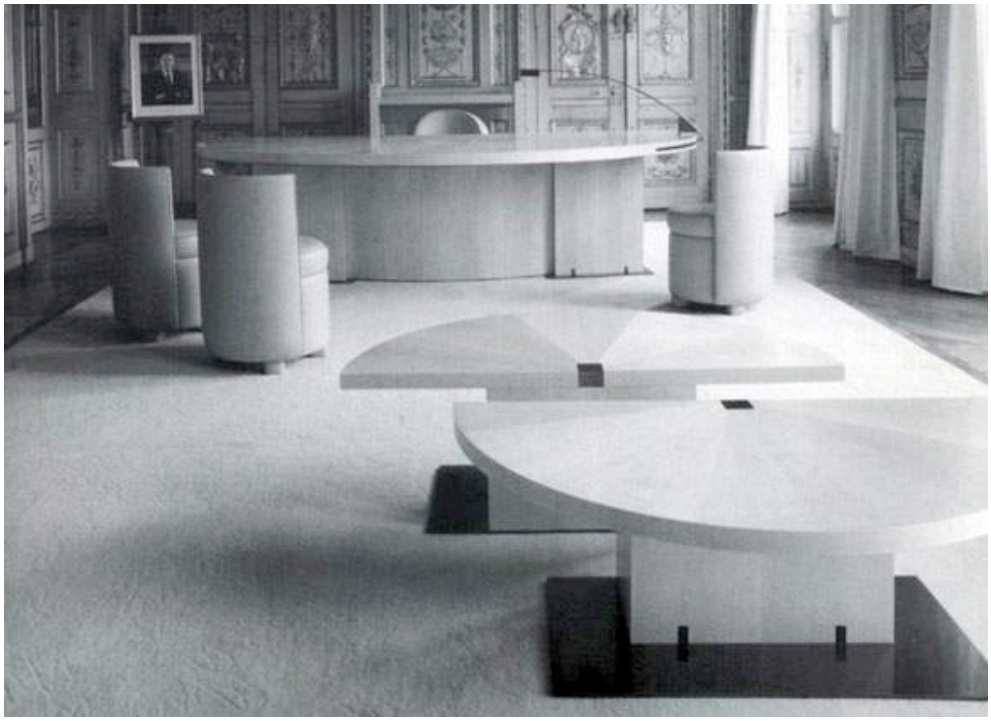
Larry Weinberg

A funny thing happened on my way to Magen XX Century, my friend's chic, and primarily French, design gallery on 11th Street. I stopped at the Strand-just looking, Joan-and found, to my surprise, a 300 page exhibition catalog published by the Pompidou Center in 1988. As a rule of thumb, anything published by the Pompidou Center is worth having, and often hard-to-find. This one, which I had not seen before, was no exception. Even better, it was in the paper bin, priced at $3.50. The catalog, called "Design Francais, 1960-1990, Trois Decennies," tracks French graphic, furniture, interior, and product design both alphabetically and chronologically through this creative and tumultuous period. In addition to a lot of captioned pictures of familiar and unfamiliar French designs, there are a series of essays in the beginning, with English translations. Can't ask for much more for three and a half bucks.

A glimpse through the essays reveals a defensiveness or diffidence on the part of the authors, at least vis a vis Italian design. The lack of French counterparts to Archizoom and Superstudio in the 60's, and Alchimia and Memphis in the 70's, is lamented: "Why does God's furniture always come from Milan and never from Paris? (Olivier Boiessiere)."



Most authors point to a lagging industrial aesthetic consciousness in France, from



the public but also pointedly from industrialists. Still, what is lacking in structure is compensated for in eloquence. Paris may not have been a design hothouse like Milan, but it was the city of Derrida, Saussure, Barthes, Foucault, and their protégés, home to deconstructive and structuralist philosophy and criticism. And where Milan had Memphis, Paris had individual creative genius.

Thus, in a way, the catalog itself serves as an apologia-it states a case for French creative brilliance and relevance, in the critical texts and in the images presented. Catherine Millet makes the point that French artists, epitomized by Francois Arnal, who founded Atelier A in 1969, turned their hands to design after the events of 1968 in an effort to reach a broader public. That this failed was not surprising-"an object impregnated with a creator's strong personality can only appeal to a few devotees"-but Millet points out that increasing media attention provided the circulation that the design itself did not. Advertisements and museum catalogs became the vehicles for disseminating

avant-garde design ideas. An example in conjunction with the essay is the promotional image for the aluminum and rubber chair by Arman, produced by Atelier A, and shown here.

Of course, the French being the French, there was recognition that they might be protesting too much. So, in discussing the role of plastics in the 1960's, Francois Kneebone noted that France was not far behind Archizoom in exploring this material, citing Marc Bethier, Marc Held, Olivier Mourgue, Pierre Paulin, and Christian Germanaz. Again, eloquence and individual éclat rather than structure. Shown here are two pieces from the acrylic "Kaleidoscope" series by Jacques Famery, produced by Steiner in 1967.

Of the many compelling images in the catalog, I selected four others to show here: Andree Putman's project for the French Minister of the Interior (1985); a Pierre Paulin electric shaver for Calor, from the same year; the witty "looseleaf desk" of 1983, designed by Pierre Sala, who studied semiotics and stagecraft; and an image of paint cans designed in the late 1960's by Jean-Phillipe Lenclose.

Carney on Design

September 2, 2010

Larry Weinberg

Clive Carney was an Australian interior designer who took a hiatus in the late 1950's to assemble materials for a book describing and depicting best-practice modernist interior decoration in a global context. His "self-imposed assignment" took him to places such as Paris, Helsinki, Stockholm, Mexico City, and New York. A considerable amount of time was apparently spent in Los Angeles, Palm Springs, Honolulu, and Miami. Evidently, no hardship was spared in the search for décor. Between daquiris and dips, he managed to shoot or cull photos of interiors by a who's who of designers and architects, in a range of styles from austere to opulent, and accessible to elite.

Among the luminaries sampled are Robsjohn-Gibbings, Gropius, Breuer, Wormley, Kagan, Dorothy Draper, J. Leleu, Kenzo Tange, Laszlo, Arbus, Knoll, Topiavaara, Gardella, and Fornasetti. Projects range from private residences to offices, restaurants, and hotels. Carney's book, "International Interiors and Design," published in 1959, is organized into ten chapters, with lead essays by the likes of Paul Reilly ("The State of British Design Today"), Edward Wormley ("Modern Design"), Jules Leleu ("Decorative Art in France"), and Carl Malmsten ("To Build and Dwell"). There are several dozen eye-popping interiors, so selecting six to illustrate here is a subjective task. What I've come up with follows:

1.Stairway in the home of Walter Gropius, Lincoln, Massachusetts. Gropius and Breuer, architects. Nice photo by Robert Damora. Note the guy with the martinis. I'm guessing Carney was schmoozing his way around the world. Very Mad Men. I don't know who did the wall sculpture--Arp, Sidney Geist?

2. Living room of a Los Angeles residence.

Cannell and Chaffin, designers. A relatively humble project, but it has clean lines and a hospitable, serene feel. I like the window treatment and the arrangement of the furniture in relation to the fireplace.

3.Living room in Milan. Interior design by Piero Fornasetti. Fabulous and fabulist. Could anyone integrate pattern, or relate objects to graphics, better than Fornasetti?

4. Living room in a New York apartment. Interior by Vladimir Kagan. Kagan's work as an interior designer is less-known than his furniture design, but like Wormley, Robsjohn-Gibbings, and Laszlo, Kagan did commission work--and interiors--for clients. The faux wall and the dramatic built-in counter give the space an almost surreal feel.

5. Living room in the architect's house in Milan. Ignazio Gardella, architect. The photo, taken by Carney, shows a vista bounded by a cut-out wall. The black marble floor and white walls, which could read cold, are warmed up by the wood furniture (which includes bookshelves just visible on the inside of the cutout), the gilt candelabra, and the artfully arranged artworks. The sheer drapes provide a soft illumination. Very sophisticated.

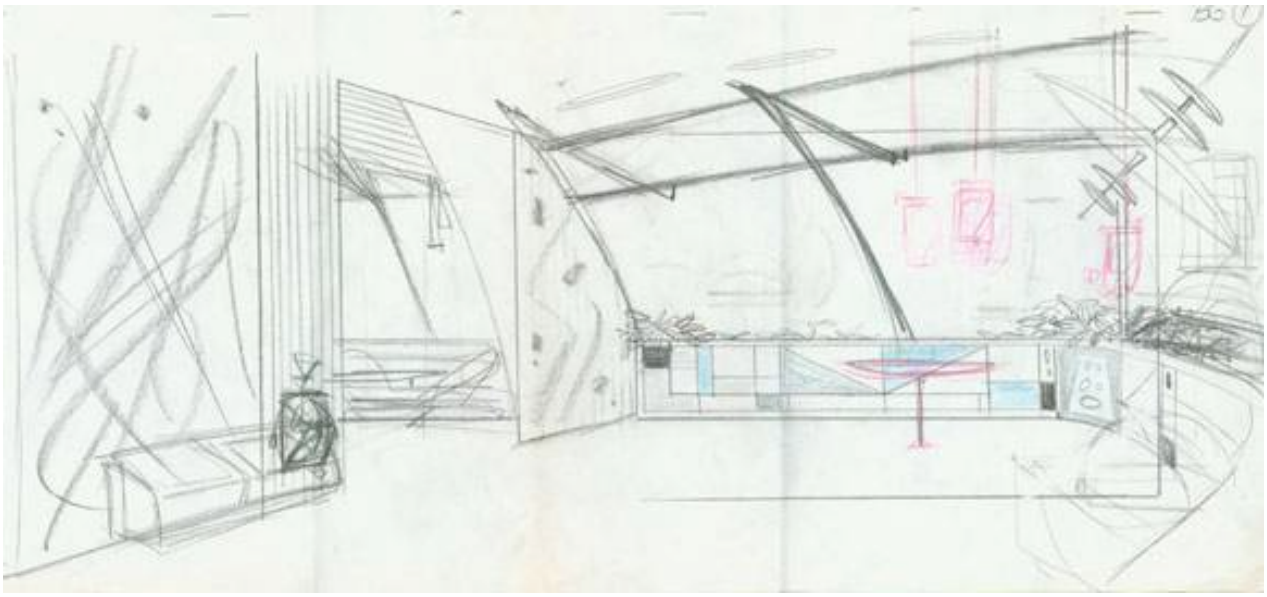
6. Interior by Andre Arbus. Speaking of sophisticated--I don't know where this room rates in Arbus' oeuvre, but it looks like a paradigm statement for understated elegance to me. Note the sculptured stone table base vis-à-vis the frieze, the full use of the height of the room, and the reflective surfaces of the mural and cupboard. Note, also, the martini glasses on the table--another soiree for our peripatetic author?

"The Jetsons" on the Drawing Board

September 30, 2010

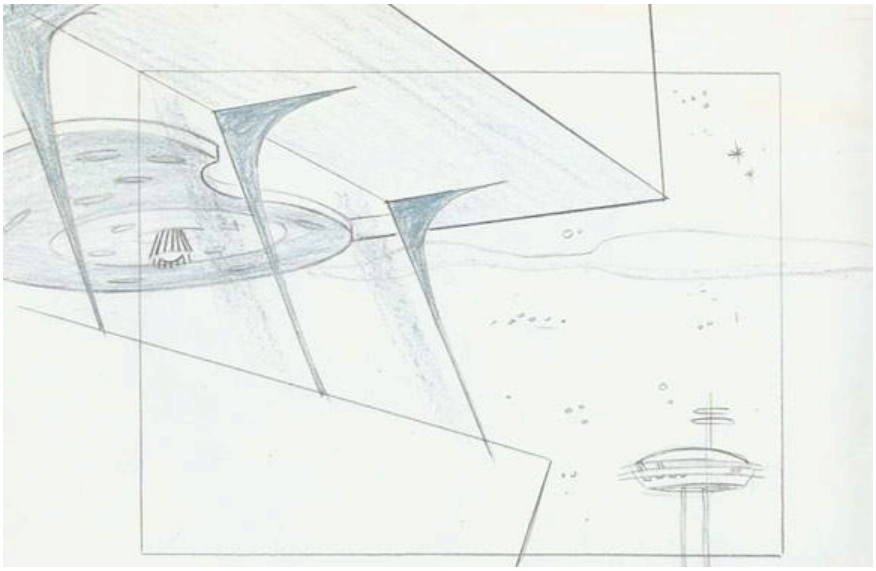
Larry Weinberg

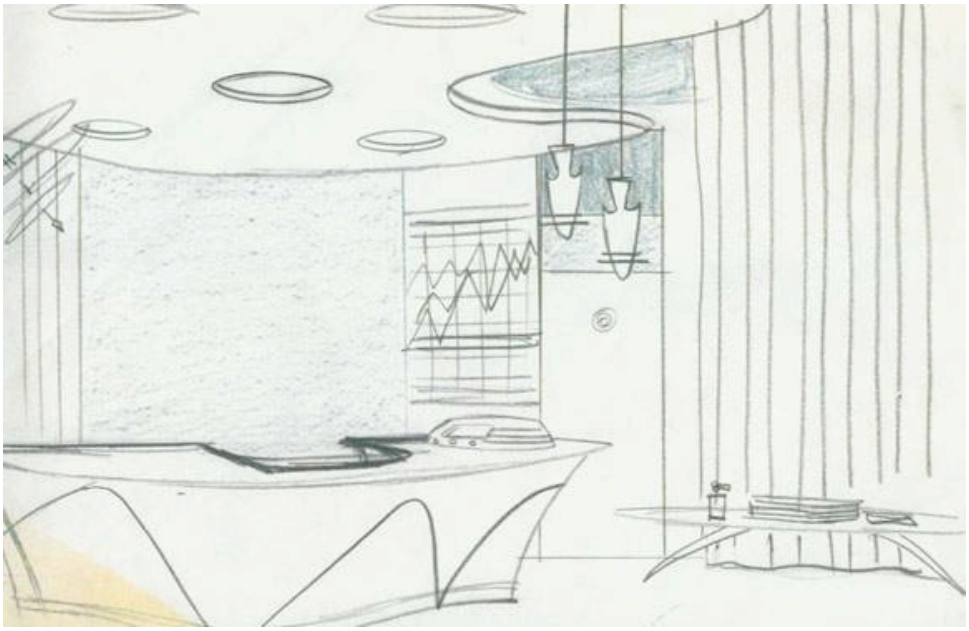
From time to time I look online for still images of "The Jetsons" interiors for a post about cool futuristic design in animated TV sitcoms. Sooner or later, I'll rent the DVD of the first season and photograph selected frames. Yesterday, though, I came across a website devoted to the animation art of Irv Spector, put up in 2008 by his son, Jay.



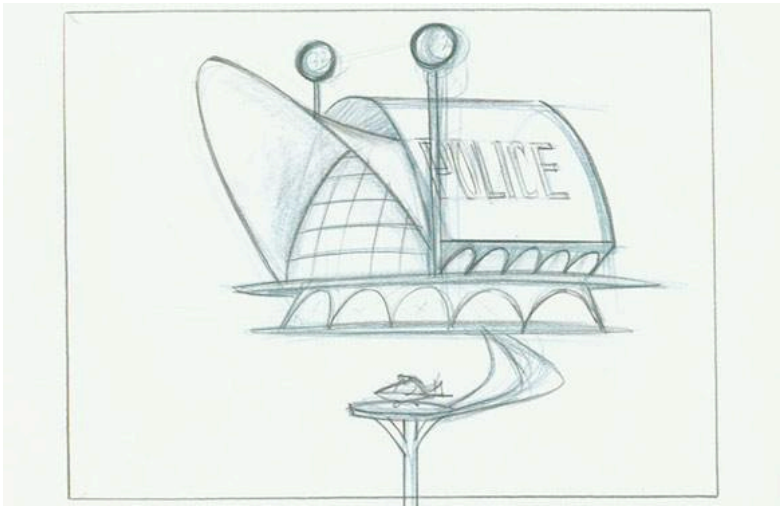
Irv worked for Paramount and Hana-Barbera, and one of his assignments was to do background and character studies for the first season of "The Jetsons." For anyone growing up in the 1960's, the show was a must-see, a futuristic version of "The Flintstones," which was itself an animated variation of "The Honeymooners."

Premiering in September 1962 on Sunday nights on ABC, "The Jetsons" had an initial run of 24 episodes, ending in March 1963 (it would be resurrected for another 50 episodes in the 80's). Thanks to serialization, "The Jetsons" had a cultural impact beyond its short run-"that's so Jetsons" is still a pejorative way to describe postwar design. Yet, as the renderings shown here demonstrate, the creative vision behind the program had much on the ball in terms of architectural and design savvy.

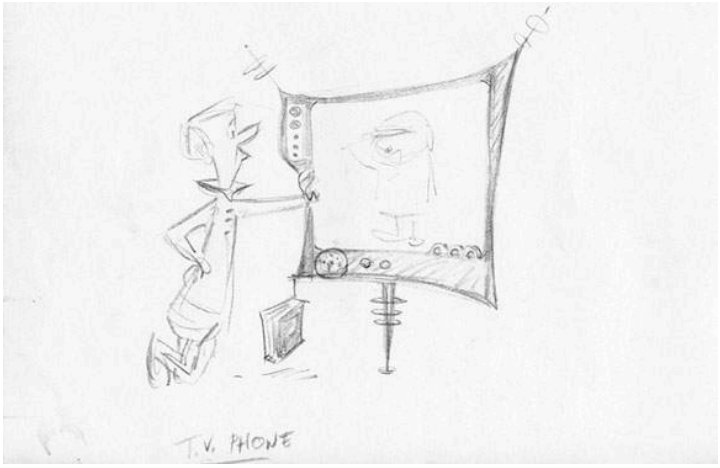




Among Irv Spector's papers was a drawing of Saarinen's TWA terminal-to Jay Spector a clear indication of the primary source of inspiration. The other source mentioned on discussion boards is the Seattle Space Needle. Both structures are clearly visible in the parabolas, swooping arcs, soaring arches, and freeform shapes of Irv's drawings-the police station is a miniature TWA terminal; the tower on the right, a version of the Space Needle. I especially like the first three renderings, sans George and Jane-these look like architectural or interior design proposals from a leading early 60's firm, more Oscar Niemeyer, even, than Morris Lapidus (sorry, Morris).

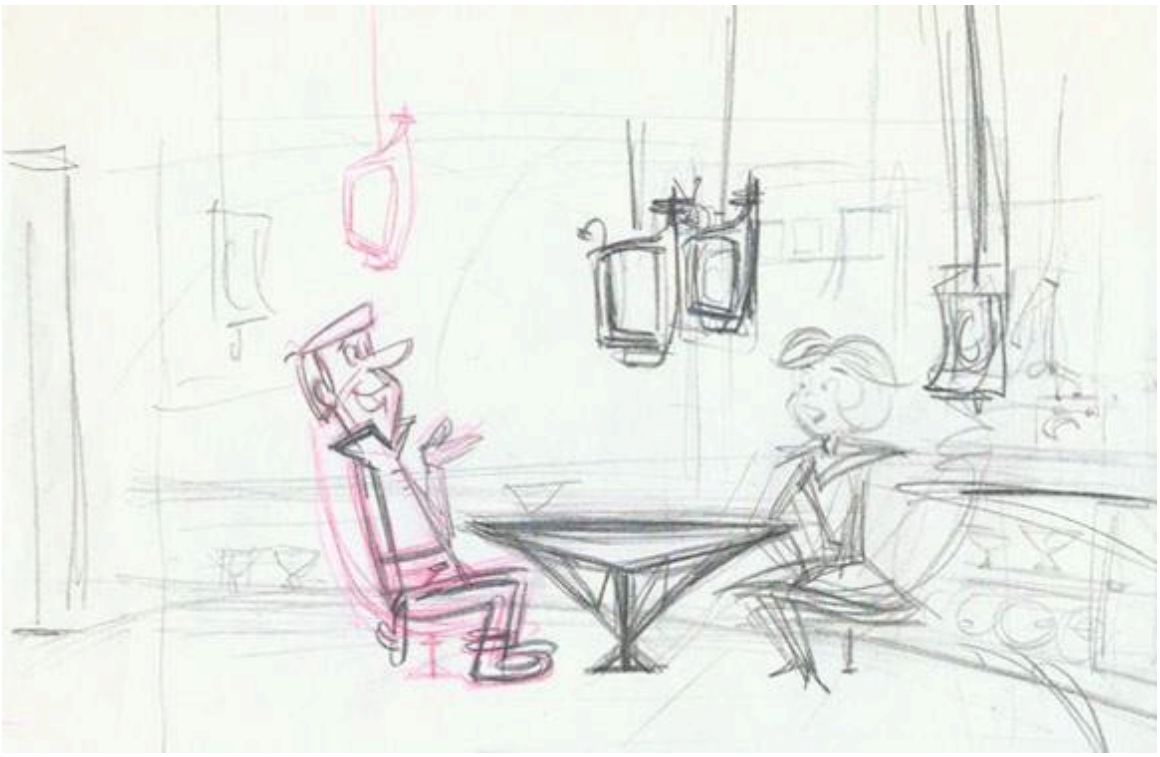


Surely, the vision of the future presented in the Jetsons owes much to 50's architectural and design practice-this, after all, was the "googie" decade, the era of Las Vegas and Miami. But it is worth noting that both the TWA Terminal and the Seattle Space Needle opened in 1962, just as "The Jetsons" came on the air. This sort of aesthetic synchronicity is rare in movies or TV; just look at "Men in Black," where the futuristic furniture was designed in the 50's and 60's. Even Morgue's Djinn series came out three years before "2001" aired. So people watching "The Jetsons" in 1962-and given the Sunday-night time slot, this likely included as many adults as children-



were absorbing utterly contemporary interior design and architectural references that conveyed futurism in their moment ("The Jetsons" was set in 2062) and still continue to do so.

As for the gadgets and gizmos, that is

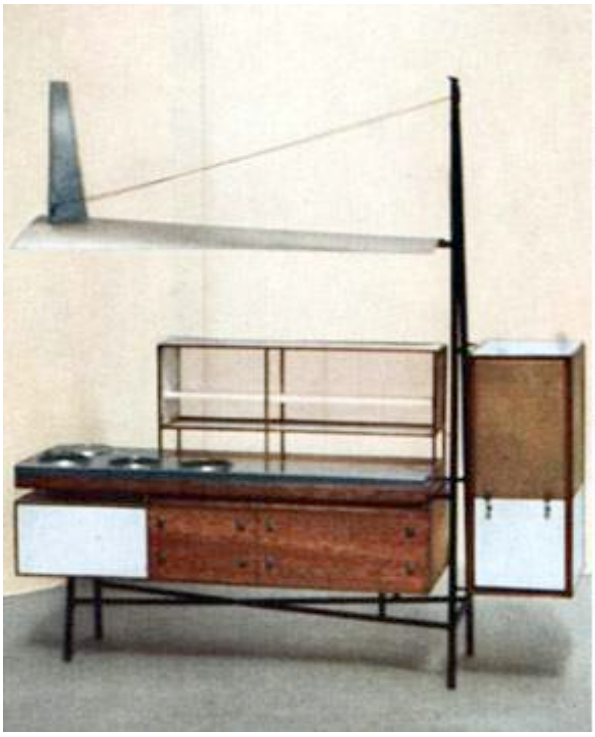


another story, but have a look at the flat-screen TV/video phone shown here. Thanks, Jay, for sharing your father's work.

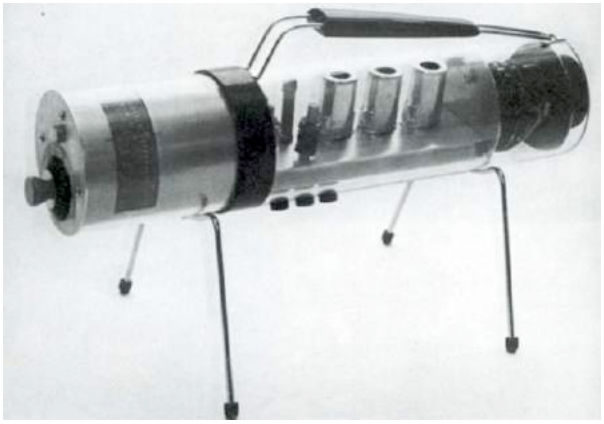
Design Education: Pratt, 1952

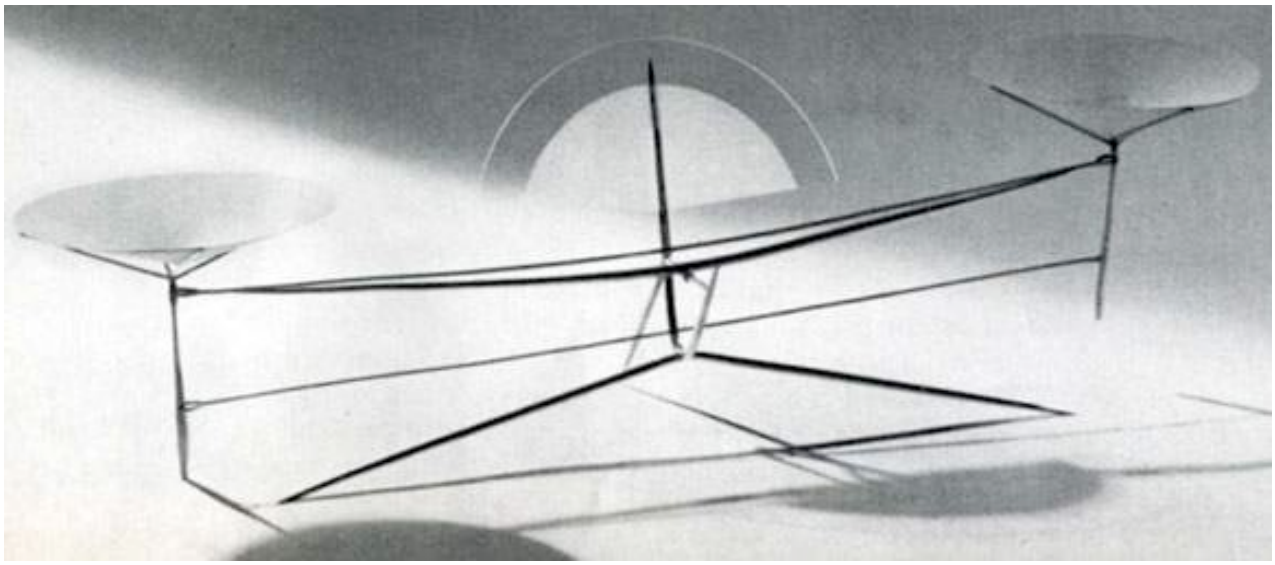
October 8, 2010

Larry Weinberg



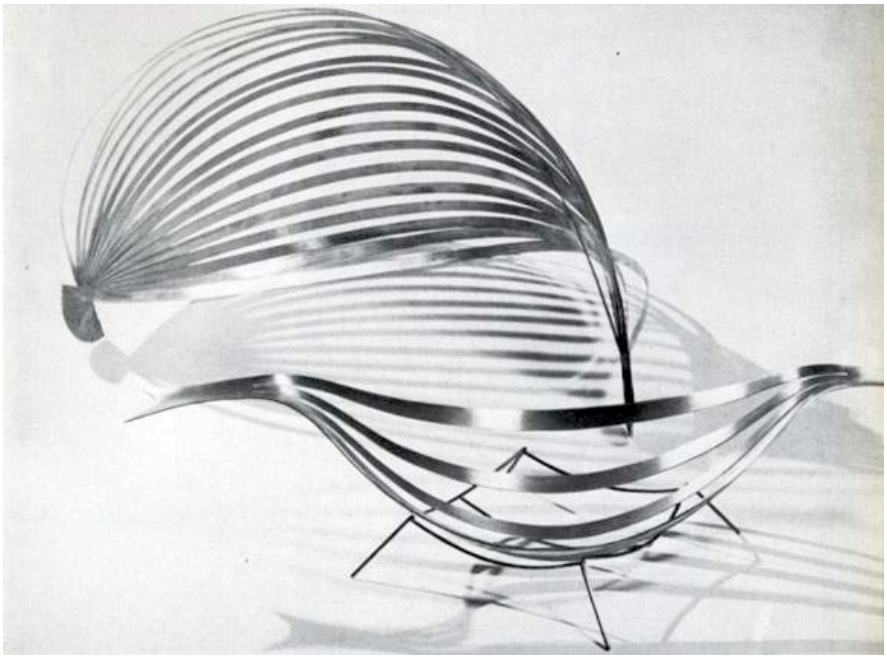
If all of the objects from the early 1950's shown here look unfamiliar, that is because none of them was ever produced or distributed. All are student projects from the Experimental Design Laboratory at Pratt, taken from an article by Alexander Kostellow, chairman of Pratt's Industrial Design Department, published in Interiors magazine in June, 1952. Founded by Donald Dohner in 1936, Pratt's Industrial Design Department took a broadly humanistic approach to training future designers, one that sought to develop creative potential, but one that ultimately centered around machine techniques, hands-on experience, and constant experimentation. The Experimental Design Laboratory, headed in





the 1950's by Luigi Contini, an engineer, and Victor Canzani, collaborated with companies such as Monsanto Chemicals (Plastics Division), Reynolds Metal, Shell Oil, Elgin Watch, Gorham Silver, and E.A. Electrical Co, so that by the fourth (and final) year of study, students were working on actual, real-world problems.

Some of the solutions proposed by these students are shown here. Of the furniture shown in the group photo, I like the profile of the chair on the middle right, and the low rectangular coffee table in the middle left. The chair with the woven seat in the middle also looks interesting. I've looked many times at the self-contained kitchen unit made of wood, metal, and plastic. Raised off the floor to prevent dirt collection, it included electric hot plates, work and storage space, and a sculptural hood that



floats over the top, suspended by a guide wire. Overall, a sort of Milo Baughman meets the Jetsons fantasy that could be plugged into a high-end interior today.

Also intriguing to me is the cylindrical voltmeter with its electronics exposed inside a plastic tube. I could see this object re-cast as a radio I'd want to own. "More charming than functionally serious" is how the Japanese-looking scale is described in the article, but on a visual scale of 1-10, it is at least a 9. Thrown in too, are the second-year experiments in designing with metal strips, which also shows the students' interest in photography. A look at a larger sampling of student work from the 50's and 60's would make a great blog, article, or exhibit. Any lenders out there?

An Airy Aerie at Kips Bay

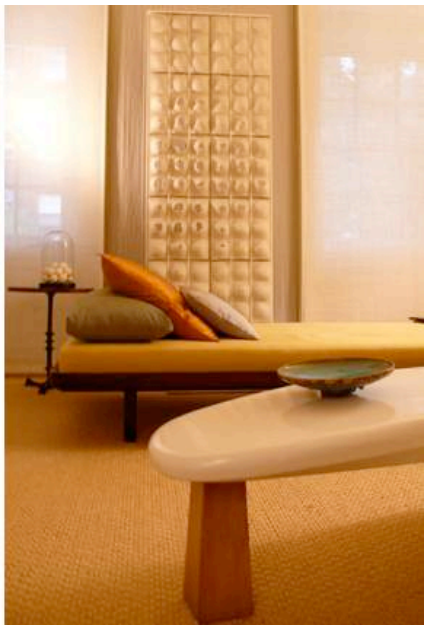
October 15, 2010

Larry Weinberg

The 38th annual Kips Bay Decorator Show House, now open to the public, marks my third adventure of this sort with Joan and Jayne Michaels of 2Michaels Design. The first two took place outside of New York, and while interesting and successful in their own right, the third time was the charm. The work processes were similar, so the first two

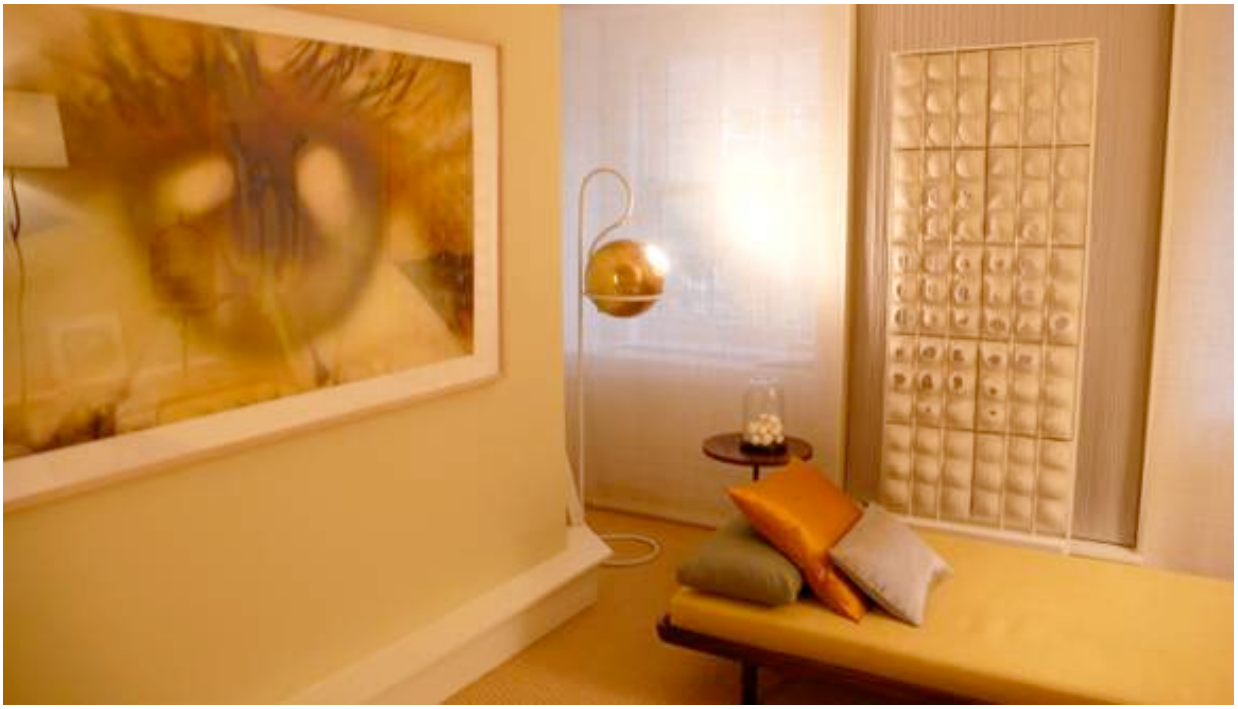
efforts provided some amount of experience for the third, but there is little that can prepare you for the additional pressure and stress of the Kips Bay stage.

Fortunately, I learned enough to stay out of the way in the beginning of the project. The two Michaels eat and drink their work, with sleep deliberately omitted. So Joan and Jayne bounced ideas, color schemes, floor plans, and pointy objects off each other for two months, then I stepped in toward the end to help them execute (the room, not each other).



The result was serene, exquisite, nuanced and layered, in my words, or chic and magical, in words I overheard opening week.

The concept for the room was to create an urban sanctuary or retreat; a place to decompress or meditate. Hence the "Buddha Tower" by Long-Bin Chen, which, incidentally, is carved out of phone books, and the prototype meditation chair, a 1987 piece by German designer Herman Becker. Hence also the low placement of cushions, daybed, and other furnishings; the "hearth"--a sculptural maquette for a fireplace by Brooklyn artist Stephen Antonson (functional with an Ecosmart bio-ethanol burning insert); the references to Eastern and ancient cultures in the Carlo Bugatti chair and the architectural framing; the soothing "mellow ivory" wall color; and the regenerative, spiritual symbology of bird and egg, seen throughout, but especially in the birdcage, the



fireplace, the "nesting" light fixture custom-made by Lindsey Adelman, and the delicate porcelain screen done in 1960 by French designer Anne Barres. For good measure, the eyeball in the Sam Samore photo, and the eyeball floor lamp connote vision or insight.

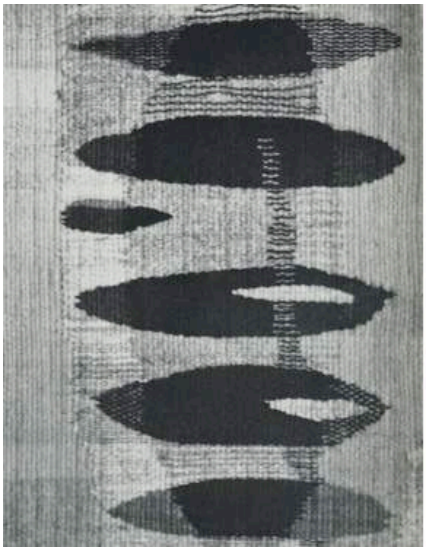
Joan and Jayne will be the first to acknowledge the collaborative nature of the project, and to credit the people who helped, by lending or providing materials, or by creating pieces. Thanks go out to the following galleries, for the vintage design and art: Magen XX Century, R 20th Century, Pascal Boyer, Sebastian+Barquet, Demisch Danant, Downtown at Claremont, Frederieke Taylor, Winston Wachter, and D'Amelio Terras. Special thanks to Stephen Antonson, Lindsey Adelman, Sam Samore, Nancy Angel, and John Kingsmill, for the creative work provided.

Larry Weinberg

Norwegian Wood, and Other Substances

January 21, 2011

Scandinavian Design, as understood in the modern design marketplace and the secondary literature, is a major constituent of Western modernism in terms of style, influence, and popularity. Even through the recession, demand for vintage, high end craft production from Denmark, Sweden, and Finland remained strong. Left out of the mix, or at least neglected, has been design and decorative art from Norway.



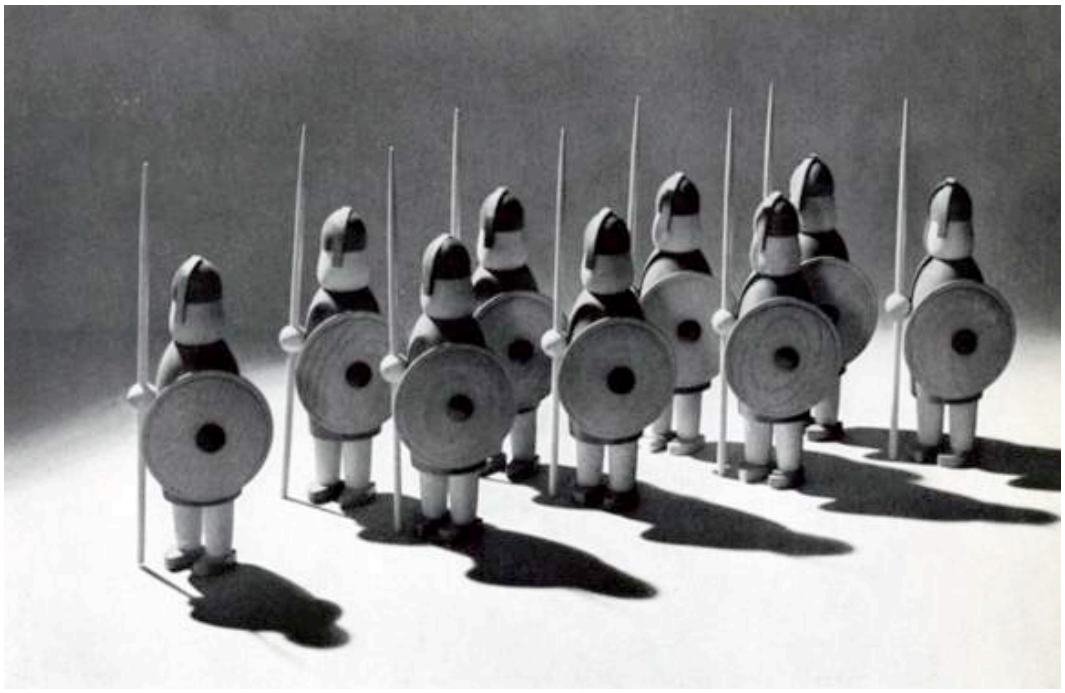
I'm not sure why this is so--I think Norway's population is smaller than her neighbors--but it is not from lack of a suitable attitude or effort in Norway. Listen to this introduction, from the booklet "Norwegian Arts and Crafts [and] Industrial Design," published around 1960, which gives us a window into this subject:

"Although it would be wrong to say that applied arts and industrial design have been developed farther in Norway than in other countries…it would certainly be no exaggeration to say that the average Norwegian believes that his life can be enriched by beautiful and yet practical surroundings, and is therefore very conscious of the importance of design…Thanks to the inherited feeling for form and color and to the first-class training provided by its technical schools, Norway is able to retain its position among the leading countries in the sphere of applied art, both in industrial design and in arts and crafts."

Granted, this is from a source intended to promote Norwegian design to English speaking countries. It still points to ongoing traditions of craftsmanship and design consciousness that provided continuity and impetus to the modernisms in other Scandinavian countries. "Norwegian Arts and Crafts" is filled with examples of contemporary work in furniture, lighting, dinnerware, pottery, glass, metal, textiles, jewelry, and

wood. Much of it is appealing, if not iconic, and it presents a representative cross-section of design activity in Norway. Yet there is nary a household name mentioned.
Five images from the catalog are presented here: the cover, in color, features a sling chair by Frederik Kayser; the wooden toy figures are by Arne Tjomsland; the glass vase and bowls are by Arne Jon Jutrem for Hadeland; the ceramic teapot and vase are by Nils Jorgensen; the hanging lamps are by Arnulf Bjorshol; the flatware by Arne Korsmo. Also shown is a ceramic vase by Norway's best-esteemed potter, Eric Ploen, taken from the Freeforms gallery website. You get the point: nice work, by artisans and designers you've never heard about.

If you look for Norwegian design year to year in "The Studio Yearbook," you will find it, alongside work from the other Scandinavian countries. Perhaps not as much material as Denmark,



Sweden, and Finland, but maybe in a ratio of 1:3 to 1:4. If you look on 1stdibs now, you will find 1 page of Norwegian design--including a pair of the Frederik Kayser armchairs--compared to 21 pages of Danish design and 12 pages of Swedish design.

So the question is: whither Norwegian design? Why is it so under-represented in the marketplace? Is it a matter of adjudged quality, or a lack of exposure to the material?

Robert Loughlin: Portrait of the Artist as a Puffier Older Man
December 16, 2010

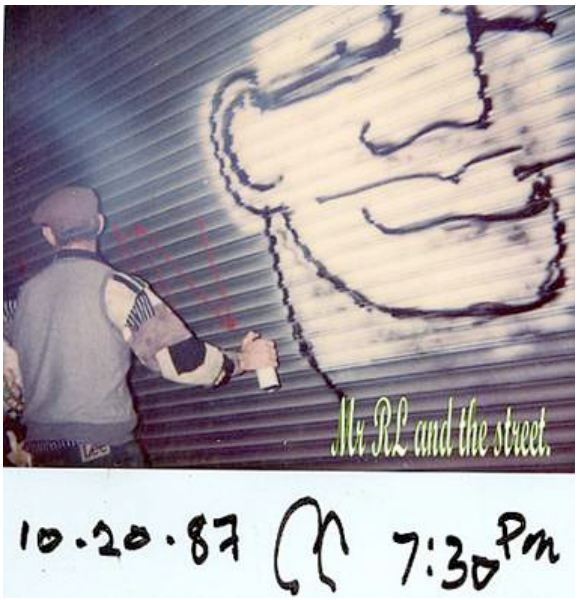
Larry Weinberg

Picker, painter, performance artist. Plastered peripatetic, intoxicated on life and an impressive array of substances. Had he been born at the turn of the century, Robert Loughlin would surely have been part of the Dada group, selling Peter Behrens clocks and Christopher Dresser trays to Man Ray and Duchamp, and painting faces on urinals. Had he been born in the thirties, he'd have been on the road with Kerouac and Burroughs. As it was, he made the scenes in Haight-Ashbury in the late 1960's, Miami Beach in the early 1980's, and the East Village soon after that, and wound up selling Nelson clocks and Dreyfuss trays to Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe, and painting faces on urinals.

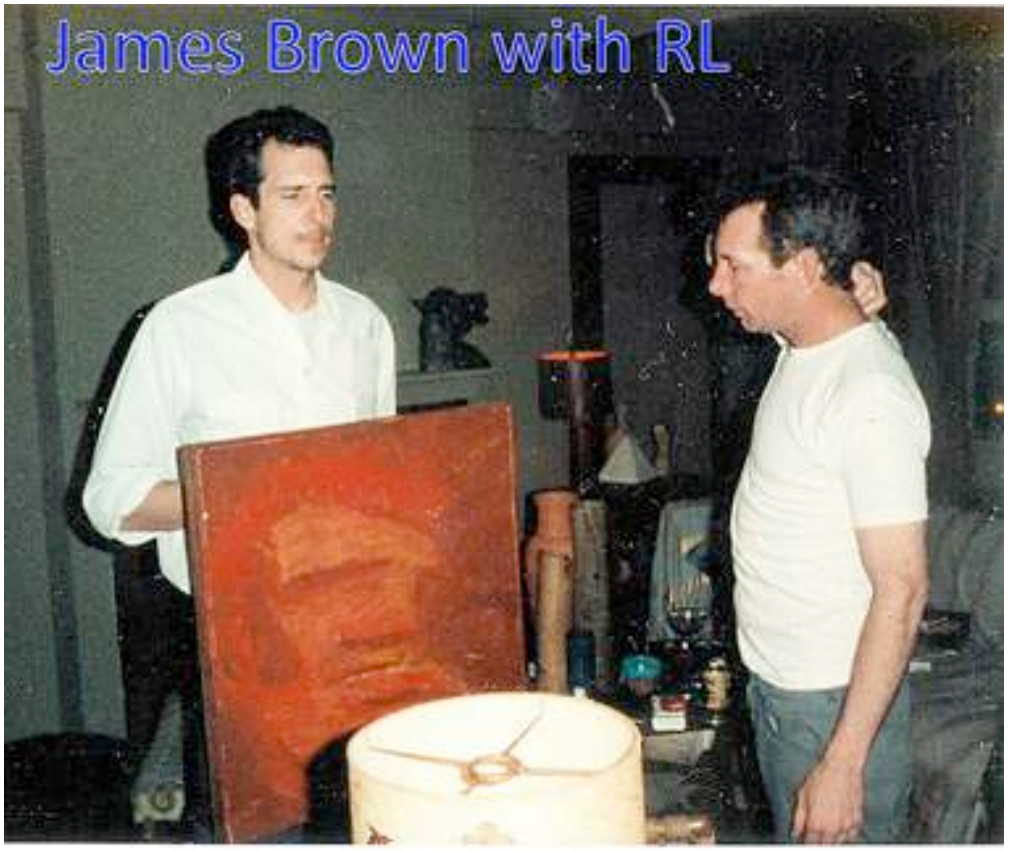
Robert began painting in the early 1980's, several years after he started picking. For the record, Robert was one of the first--maybe the first--to rediscover mid-century American design in the late 1970's, at a time when everyone else was looking for French deco or chrome Machine Age. Robert's stories about his finds are the stuff of legend. He is a

human divining rod for fungible modern design (I can hear him snickering at the word rod). His colorful life-a self-creation drawn from Dada, Beat, Pop, Punk, and Gay subcultures, is distilled into his painting, which is itself distilled into a single image. The Brute, an amalgam of his own face and that of his longtime partner Gary Carlson, is now an outsider art icon, having been painted on canvases, cardboard boxes, wooden crates, chairs, and buildings.

Robert's work is turning up in high-end interior design projects and galleries, and is about to be the subject of a catalog and two exhibitions.Somehow, after all the years of living like a character in a Hunter Thompson or William Burroughs story, Robert is still picking and still painting. He dropped in at my showroom this morning to say hello-I hadn't seen him in several years, though I am representing his work in NYC-and he couldn't resist trying to sell me a Karl Springer coffee table he'd recently found. We chatted for a while, which means I listened to him reminisce and dish. One of these days, I'll have to get him on tape. I've known Robert since the early nineties, and I know there's a good article or two or three there. Before he left, I got him to sit in front of one of the large canvases he painted last summer for an impromptu portrait. This image is shown here, along with a handful of Polaroid pictures culled from his website. Robert told me he recently painted the Brute on a Port-o-San at a New Jersey Flea Market. The following week he saw that someone had hacked it out of the heavy plastic and absconded with it. How you know you've arrived.



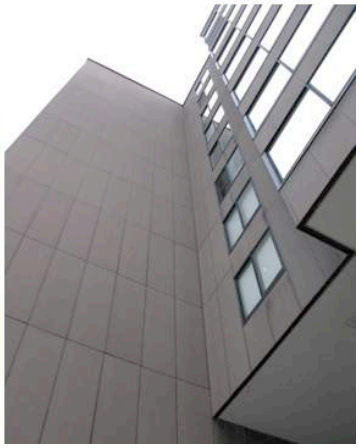
Mr. Robert at 50/ Fifty in the early 90's



Roosevelt Island: A Tradition of Brutalism
December 9, 2010

Larry Weinberg

Roosevelt Island, formerly Welfare Island, has a rich and unusual architectural history. As an island next to a metropolis, it was used during the nineteenth century to sequester the insane and the infirm. (For a treatment of the cultural basis of such insanity, see Michel Foucault's seminal "Madness and Civilization"). The dominant structures were Andrew Jackson Davis' 1839 NYC Lunatic Asylum, which included the still-standing Octagon, and James Renwick's 1856 Smallpox Hospital. Also included was a workhouse built in 1852 that continued to house petty criminals until the completion of the jail at Riker's Island.



The shift from institutional to residential brutalism began in 1969, with the leasing of the island to NY State's Urban Development Corp. (UDC). From the beginning of the lease, the island became a planned community, expressing modernist architectural concerns with housing and planning, as well as appearance. Philip Johnson and John Burgee contributed the plan, which created housing for 20,000 mid-income residents, such

as teachers, under the aegis of Mitchell-LAMA.

A walk around the grounds of the Riverview and Eastwood apartments puts one in mind of Corbusier in Marseilles, or Oscar Niemeyer in Brazil. The direct connection here is Jose Luis Sert, who designed the Eastwood, completed in 1975. The Spanish-born Sert, dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design at the time, was a protégé of Corbusier, and worked on urban planning projects in Latin America before landing at Harvard.

The lead architect of the Riverview, John Johansen, was himself a 1939 graduate of the Harvard program, and a member of the Harvard Five, along with Philip Johnson.

If not intellectually surprising, then, the striking modernist vistas at Roosevelt Island are nonetheless unexpected. The buildings themselves reflect the austere geometry of the International Style--boxes and rectangles--but tempered for human needs, including the need for visual diversity. The step-backs and ample fenestration provide panoramic views of the river and the City; a walkway with benches loops the island; both the Eastwood and Riverview have indoor pools.

As for the appearance, it is textbook Brutalism: texture, pattern, and color temper the structural geometry. Beton brut--raw concrete--is the dominant material, followed by brick, slate, colored ceramic tile, and painted metal. Elements such as the painted tubular ducts, reminiscent of a ship, add nautical local flavor. The colors--orange, yellow, blue--recall Corbusier, as does the use of pilotes.

A close look at exterior detailing reveals a tapestry of pattern, material, shape, and color, such as at the entrance to the Rivercross. Even a view up the façade shows a juxtaposition of line and shape, horizontals and verticals that change with the light and weather. The interiors of both buildings feature orange and yellow tiles, and spare but warm furnishings mixing wood and metal with leather and fabric. Highly textured concrete walls in the recently restored Rivercross become visual features. Unfortunately, I was not encouraged to photograph the interior at Rivercross, or I'd be sharing those images here. I'm not sure what type of reception you can expect, but it is worth a trip on the tram to look at these two buildings, and to experience the quirky and somewhat quixotic architectural moment of 1970's Brutalism.

Circular Reasoning: On the Geometry of Chairs
November 24, 2010

Larry Weinberg

Beginning with de Stijl, geometry became an obvious metaphor for the scientific and mechanistic modes of thinking associated with avant-garde modernism. Mondrian's canvases, arguably influenced themselves by Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie School architecture, became templates for mid-century wall systems and modular case good systems, as well as graphic inspiration for architecture.

All of these applications self-evidently involved rectilinearity or at least linearity--the so-called deconstruction and reconstruction of the box, applied both to surface and volume. Famously, this was the approach taken with Rietveld's Red and Blue chair, which was explicitly linear, a rigid composition of wooden planks designed with little regard for comfort. Much cantilevered, Bauhaus-inspired furniture would also fit into this camp, though with somewhat greater interest in comfort. In the opposing, organic camp, are chairs such as the Womb chair, ergonomic in character, curvilinear, and fitted to the human form.

The circle occupies a place somewhere in between though much closer to the geometric camp; in Platonic

terms, the circle is perfect, the ultimate geometric symbol of wholeness, unity, infinity. With tables, there is a long tradition of circular design: the Knights of the Round Table, round table discussions, etc. (note the underlying egalitarian aspect of this shape--no one sits in a privileged position).

Though curvilinear, the circle does not suggest itself for chair design--people have curves but are not hemispheric or conical, at least generally speaking. A circular or spherical chair is not inherently ergonomic, though it can be rendered comfortable with slings, padding, pillows, or butt-shaped indentations. Partly for this reason, and likely for technical reasons also, relatively few chair designs hewed to the geometry of the circle. And those that did tended to have an agenda: either experiments in form or ideological or symbolic statements of some type.

Beginning in the early 1950's, the circle was deployed in chair design in the work of Donald Knorr, Lina Bo Bardi, and Roberto Mango. Knorr's chair, shaped from a ribbon of sheet metal, shared first prize in a 1950 MoMA Low-Cost Furniture competition. Distributed by Knoll, and painted red, yellow, or black, with black metal legs, the chair possessed a minimalist and elegant beauty. Intended to be comfortable, the chair was also offered in a padded version, just in case. Bo Bardi, the Italian/Brazilian architect and designer, contributed an eye-catching chair consisting of a hemispheric seat floating inside a round tubular metal base. The chair could be used parallel to

the ground or at an angle, for a variety of seating or lounging positions. The image here, which uncropped shows two such options, is from the cover of an Interiors magazine from the early 1950's. It is notable, and surely meaningful, that Bo Bardi is a woman designer and the circle is a female archetype. Unlike Knorr and Bo Bardi, the Mango chair illustrated here is made of wood--in this case shaped plywood--and it looks like a James Prestini bowl on legs. This chair is part of a series done by Mango in wood and metal, exploring the possibilities of the circle as a chair frame. Significantly, all the designs referred to here had one thing in common: a lack of commercial success, and hence a small production run.

Continuing this tradition were three circular chair designs from the late 1960's. In the case of Arman's 1969 chair for Atelier A, consisting of two steel rings with a leather sling, the intent was not serial production but design/art; more a functional sculpture than a seating solution. Joe Colombo's 1969 Tube chair for Flexform cleverly used round tubes looking like paint rollers to achieve a variety of seating options. Despite advertisements pointing to the comfort obtainable through the flexibility of assembly, the chair was far too radical for prevalent taste cultures.

Somewhat more accessible, and commercially viable, was the work in plastic by Finnish designer Eero Aarnio. His Pastille chair of 1967, with its contoured seating indentation, took the circle in an ergonomic direction, while his Ball chair of 1969, shown here and based on a sphere, required cushions and pillows to suggest comfort. The Ball chair

stood, and stands, as a production analog to the utopian 1960's preoccupation with self-contained living environments.

While this is not an exhaustive list of post-war circular chair designs, the two clusters around 1950 and 1969 do suggest an underlying cultural rationale at those moments—some metaphoric or symbolic reason for this attraction to the circle. A topic I will deal with when I get around to it…

Patrick Jouin: MAD Man du Jour
November 18, 2010

Larry Weinberg

For Patrick Jouin, ascendant French design star and subject of a solo exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), exposure to the precision, rigor, and poetic potential of the machine came at an early age. His father was a technician and craftsman; in the family basement was a Roger Tallon "Gallic" lathe--a room-sized machine tool designed by France's pre-eminent modern industrial designer. Jouin cites this circumstance, along with a trip to a Da Vinci exhibition, as formative influences. Da Vinci and Tallon: it would be hard to find two better avatars for a career spent relentlessly sketching and innovating, finding surprising beauty in pushing technical boundaries.

After studying industrial design in Paris, and an apprenticeship with Philippe Starck, Jouin opened his own studio in 1998. Some fifty pieces of product design from the decade-plus since are featured at MAD, in what is Jouin's first solo show in the U.S. (He

has had several elsewhere; most recently at the Pompidou Centre). Included are greatest hits, such as the One-Shot Stool, part of the Solid line of polyurethane pieces produced by 3D rapid prototyping (2004); Optic Furniture Cubes for Kartell (2008); the Alessi Pasta Pot, designed in collaboration with Alain Ducasse (2007); and the Chaud line of ceramic tourines hand-made by Vallauris potters (2002). Also included are current and forthcoming designs such as the Zermatt line of stainless steel cutlery for Puiforcat; the "Bloom" table lamp, also produced by stereolithography, that has a one-piece hinged "bud" that easily opens or blooms; G.H. Mumm's champagne accessories; and a modular sofa for Bernhardt.

In discussing his work, eloquently, at a presentation last Thursday, Jouin referred repeatedly to simplicity and the role of gesture, obviously two keywords for him. By simple, Jouin means something like direct, honest, and unpretentious; less a matter of egotistic self-expression than a deep meditation on the program and the context. What appears simple or self-evident is the product of a long

process of research, engagement with the problem or problems to be solved, technical experimentation, and endless sketching, often done at a favorite café. Beauty is often a byproduct of technical and formal inventiveness bumping into physical and economic constraint.

Gesture, for Jouin, apprehends the context in which design is used, and assigns to design a large social role as non-verbal communication. Repeatedly, he likens design to dance. In designing the chair for the Jules Verne restaurant at the Eiffel Tower, for example, Jouin imagined a couple on a first date: the ritual or gesture of being seated at the table became an important part of the romance--the visual impression had to be memorable, the chair had to slide easily, so the lady could be seated gracefully, etc. So too with the Chaud turrine--taking the top off and putting it under the bottom saves the waiter a trip--and the Zermatt cutlery, which are curved so that only two points touch the (dirty) tablecloth. This type of attention to detail and usage defines Jouin's work. His objects embody a rigorous yet graceful and intimate choreography that plays out hundreds of times a day as his products are used.

Jouin is a household name in France, for his product designs, his public commissions, and his architectural and interior work with Sanjit Manku. It is said that one of

his designs is encountered in Paris every 340 feet. In New York, we are more fortunate--we can see one of his designs every 3 feet, but only by visiting MAD before February 6.

Larry Weinberg

Czech Modern

February 10, 2011

Many mid-century surveys of decorative and industrial arts have an agenda of celebrating and promoting the work of a nation, region, or city. So it is refreshing to come across one that finds industrial production wanting, and posits room for improvement. And you have to like a picture book that begins with a chapter entitled "Craftsmanship and Cybernetics."

"Modern Design in the Home," by Milena Lamarova, is the book in question. Published in 1965, it surveys postwar Czech design in furniture, glass, ceramics, and textiles. Glass and textiles had particularly rich and deep traditions in the region. But beyond her national design heritage, the author is absorbed by the Big Questions in modernist aesthetic theory. Like, regarding domestic objects such as bed, bowl, and cup, with prototypes in antiquity, "should (we) take national culture into consideration or simply throw out the old traditions," and "Should (we) look for totally new forms and shapes or should (we) adapt and develop the traditional ones?" Behind these questions is a reckoning of the role of craft in the machine age.

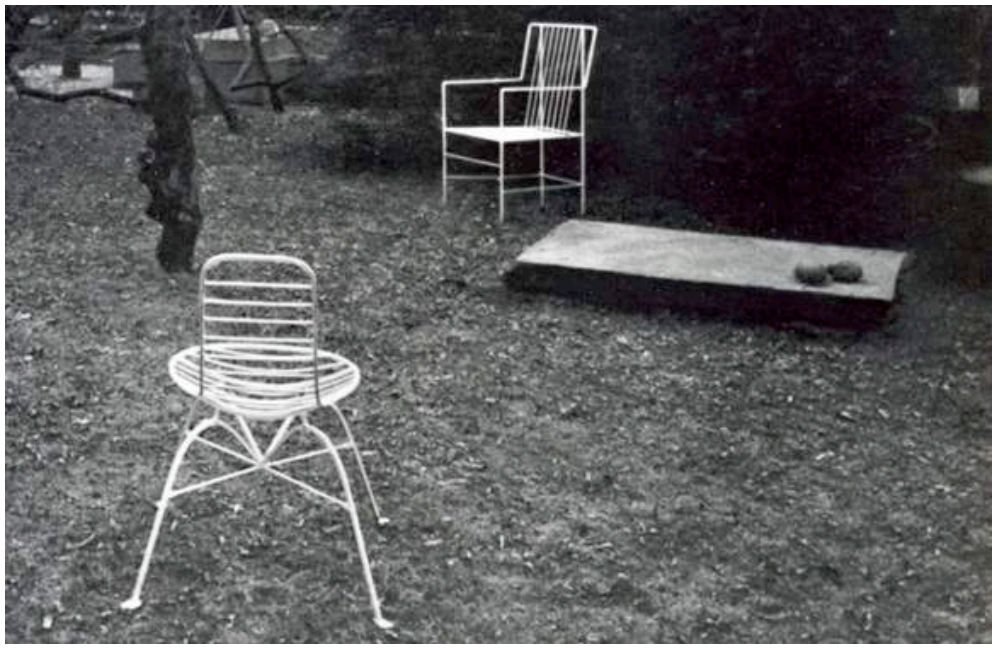
It is precisely in the domestic arena that battle lines between old and new are drawn, literally hitting home. As Lamorova notes, "we look to [familiar and constantly used objects] for the physical assurance that there exists an organic connection between the world of man, the world of things and the world of production." If these things disappoint, we become disoriented and disturbed.

Ultimately, Lamorova speaks for an extension of mechanical production in service of human needs, including the need for diversity. She sums up thus: "The value and beauty of an object should be related to the force and depth of thought which gives birth to it. There is no reason why it should not be produced by the machine. This is nothing more ore less than an attempt to give a deeper meaning to our modern technological civilization."

The themes developed in the first, discursive chapters continue through the book. They echo what was going on in progressive design circles in America and Western Europe with the following key difference: in 1948, all Czech industries were nationalized, and in 1959, an umbrella organization responsible for glassware, ceramics, plastics, fabrics, clothing, and furniture was created, called the Institute of Home and Fashion Design. So what developed in the private sector in the West was essentially governed in the command economy of Czecholsovakia, with mixed results.

A cross-section of Czech production design, as presented here, confirms at least one supposition as to why mid-century Czech design is not better-known in the West: much of it is derivative of Danish and American design, and of average visual quality. Still, there are notable exceptions, particularly in the areas of glass--an unbroken eight century tradition in Bohemia--and textiles. Six examples across the board, follow:

•A sideboard in natural and laquered ash with metal legs, designed by Frantisek Jirak, and produced in 1963. Also in this shot is a hand-knotted rug by Jiri Mrazek.



•Metal-frame chairs by Otto Rothmayer, produced 1960-63.

• Blown glass jars with lids. Designed by Vratislav Sotola and produced at the Borske works, 1963.

•

Decorative bottles in opaline and colored glass, by Josef Hosopdka, also for Borske, 1963.

Tapestry-style woven fabric in cotton. Designed by Vera Drnkova-Zarecka, and produced by Umelecka remesla, Prague, 1963.

•Group of vases in coarse clay by Julie Horova-Kovacikova.

Larry Weinberg

A Meditation on Italian Modernism

February 20, 2009

Most people reading design blogs have probably heard of the seminal 1972 MoMA exhibition titled “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape.” Few such readers, I’ll venture, have heard of an exhibition held at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli in Milan the year before called "Milano 70/70." The catalog for the former exhibition is a classic text in wide circulation; the three-part catalog for the latter is an extensive but seldom-seen rarity. I have a ragged and waterlogged copy of *Part II (1915-45)*

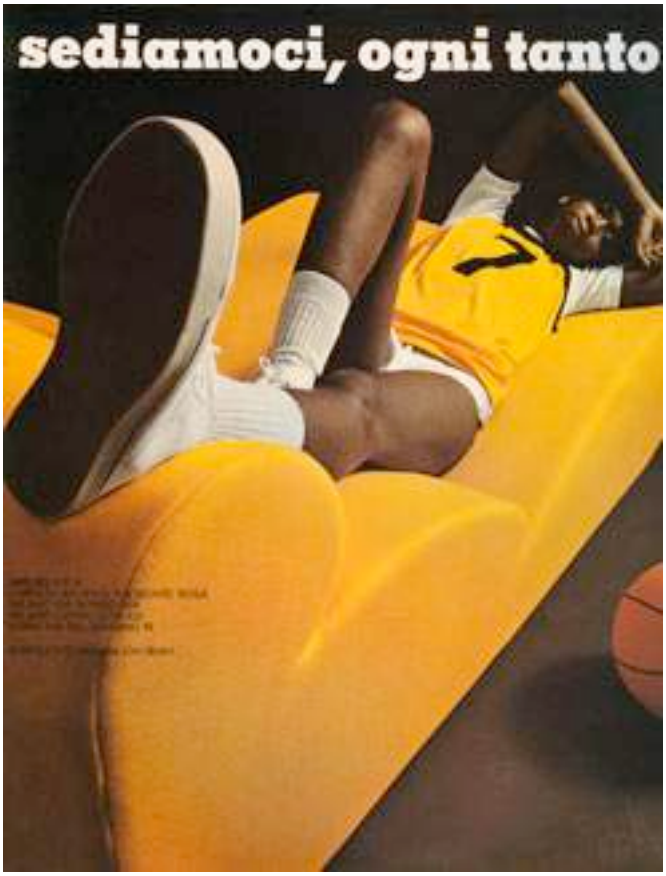
in my library, which I was looking at last week, and I do mean looking, since the text is entirely in Italian.

"Milano 70/70" is both a retrospective of a century of design from Milan and a celebration of a decade (the 1960's) that elevated Milan to the center of the design universe. The type of design produced in Milan during the 1960's—created by designers such as Joe Colombo, Vico Magistretti, Achille Castiglioni, and Gae Aulenti—is easily recognized and justly celebrated for visual excitement and quality of construction. What caught my attention in the catalog was a section at the end with about 80 ads, placed by manufacturers such as Artemide, Kartell, Flos, Olivetti, Tecno, Driade, and Brion Vega. I selected five ads to present here based purely on visual merit, as fully realized expressions of a sophisticated and coherent aesthetic sensibility. This was to be it for the post, but the very presence of an advertising section in a museum catalog called for further review, and in looking more closely at the five ads, two themes emerge that demand attention: context (or lack thereof) and plasticity.

Context requires us to step back a bit. A good overview of post-war Italian design is provided by Penny Sparke in an essay entitled "Design, Ideology and the Culture of the Home in Italy" (1990). Sparke contrasts early post-war initiatives toward reconstruction that centered on the human inhabitants of unified interior spaces with the manufacturer-led consumer market that developed by the 1960's. Geared largely toward the export of luxury goods, this market emphasized the isolated object, which, according to Sparke, became increasingly aestheticized and decontextualized.

Objects, in short, were presented as sculpture, and in part by this association with Fine Art, became symbols of status for their possessors. The ads illustrated here, as well as the others in the catalog, show this dynamic: objects are seldom placed in relation to other objects, and are never shown as part of a habitat. Instead, they are shown in stark, often abstract ways that highlight their sculptural modernity. The graphic quality of the ads further reinforces the artistic status of the objects.

Curiously, most of the ads I selected show plastic or urethane-foam furniture, and in certain fundamental ways, the 60's were indeed a plastic decade. According to Sparke, however, even plastic was pressed into service in Italy during the 1960's toward the creation of *objets de luxe*, characterized by strong, modern forms and high-quality craftsmanship, and publicized as items of sculpture. By 1972, this trend was coming under attack from proponents of 'anti-design,' nowhere more vividly than in a manifesto published by Ettore Sottsass in connection with the environment (pictured here) he created for the MoMA show.



Here is how Sottsass put it: "I wasn't in the least concerned with making furniture, or a cute or amusing environment…The form is not cute at

all. It is a kind of orgy of the use of plastic, regarded as a material that allows an almost complete process of deconditioning from the interminable chain of psycho-erotic self indulgences about possession—I mean the pleasure of possessing something that seems to us precious…To explain this more simply, let's say that the idea is to succeed in making furniture from which we feel so detached, so disinterested, and so uninvolved that it is of absolutely no importance to us. That is, the form is designed so that after a time it fades away and disappears."

Such an environment would be tough to sell, so it is not surprising that environments-for-living remain utopian while Kartell, Artemide et al continue to produce their 60's repertoire, and vintage 60's Italian pieces command high prices at auction.

Larry Weinberg

Round Table Discussion: Kitty Hawks at Parsons

March 26, 2009

During a conversation at the *Interior Design* Hall of Fame dinner last fall, Kitty Hawks, herself a past inductee, mentioned to me that she would be teaching a course on interior design at Parsons. Kitty and I go back a bit, as she used to come down to SoHo to see my shop and my Jack Russell terrier, Winnie.

I'm not sure whether Kitty remembered the mid-century design or the dog more, but she invited me to speak to her class about matters of design, taste, and style. I logged much of my misspent youth in classrooms, as an undergraduate and graduate student, but had not set foot in one in decades, so it was with some trepidation that I agreed.

A few days before the class, my assignment arrived via e-mail: "Considering how important the mid-century aesthetic is, and how influential the dealers were in making it so, it would be great to hear how you started your business, and how it changed over time. Include visuals." Once I got over the disappointment about not being asked about the hermeneutics of taste, or gender politics in French modernist interiors (can you spell relief?), I quickly scribbled some notes about my own experiences and cobbled together some jpegs on a disc. The discussion went pretty well, lasted an hour or so, and was shepherded along by Kitty and her colleague Danielle Galland.

In recounting the early days of my first gallery, Lin/Weinberg, I realized that we opened during an economic downturn in 1994, when spaces were available to start-up businesses, and we entered a field—mid-century design—that was still forming, and was hence something of a free-for-all. The period after WWII witnessed an explosion in material culture, some of it great, some good, much either not so good or downright

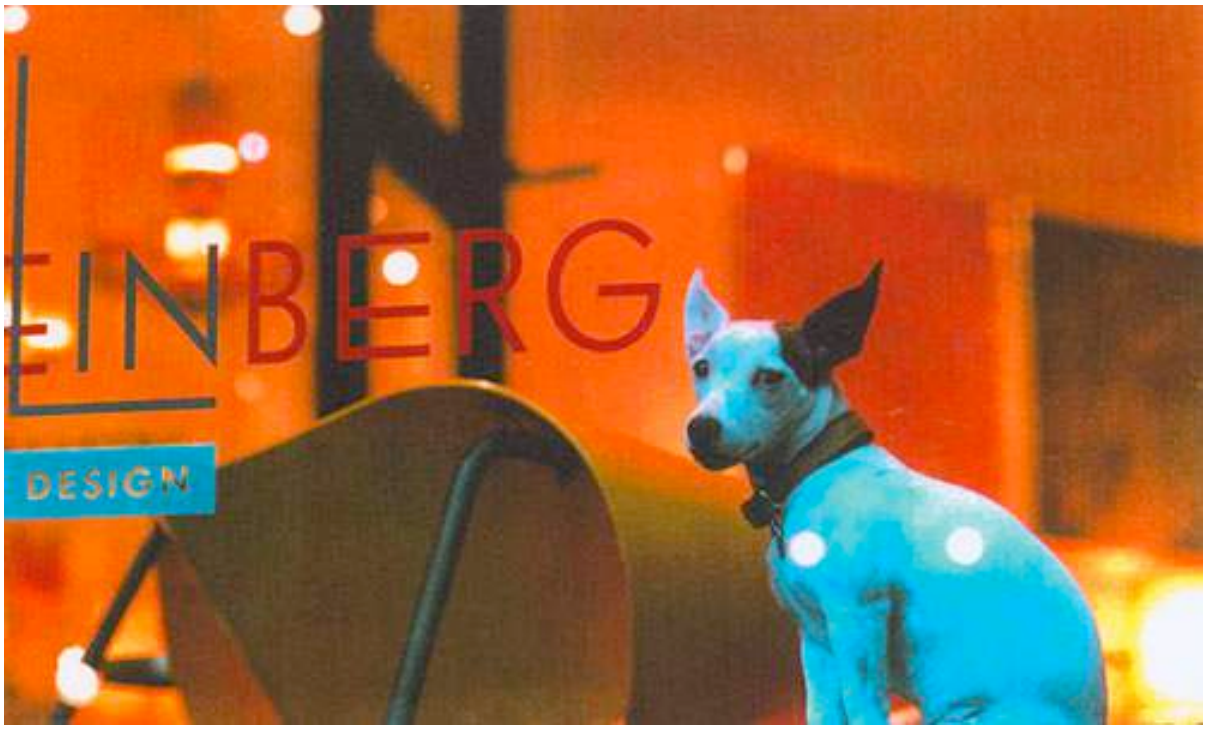
awful. Our job was to sift through this mountain of material and decide which pieces to reintroduce to the market. Kitty praised me for having “authentic taste,” and I took this as a compliment without knowing exactly what she meant, but if it is a function of talent and application, I would submit the function is skewed toward application, toward the

untold hours spent researching and handling objects. Much of the visual skill I acquired, I told the class, came from looking closely at the things themselves.

Over the past decade, dramatic changes have taken place in the modern design market, affecting dealers, interior designers, and consumers alike. A considerable part of the class was spent tracking these changes and their implications. I noted or should have noted the following: the market for modern design matured, with the canon becoming more tightly defined and information becoming more freely disseminated. More dealers entered the mid-century field, and more mid-century designs were copied or re-issued, putting downward pressure on the prices of mid-level vintage pieces and on upholstered items like sofas in particular. At the same time, magazine-fueled demand and finance-sector money sent the prices on top vintage pieces skyward, at least until recently. Auction houses, notably Sotheby's, Phillips, Wright, Rago, and LAMA, became leading-edge retailers of mid-century design, taking market share from galleries and drawing in a steady flow of the best material.

All of this was driven and abetted by the rise of the internet and its increasing influence on the market for modern design. From websites like eBay to 1stdibs, more and more business was done via search engines and email. The net result has been a scramble to find new business models to adapt to these changes. Branding, marketing, and publicity have become more important, galleries have added design services (take note, Parsons students) and product lines, and have sought out emerging talent. The main point Kitty made for her class is that in an era of virtual shopping and designing, it is still imperative to have hands-on, tactile experience—you still need to sit in chairs and to look closely and carefully at details of construction such as wood graining and joinery.

At the end of the discussion the floor was opened for questions, and inevitably the first question asked was “What is the next big thing?” or “What do you do when you graduate in the middle of a depression?” Kitty bailed me out on this by suggesting that young designers should develop and cultivate their own taste and interests, and also should work hard. I suggested that they draw on their youthful enthusiasm and energy, and pointed out that in grim economic times there is opportunity for creativity and innovation. Actually, I read this latter part somewhere but believe it to be true—storefronts are available again in New York, for one thing. Time ran



out before I could tell the old joke about career prospects in our field: How do you make a small fortune in interior design? Start with a large fortune.

Some things are better left unsaid.

From top: George Nakashima table and chairs, Lin/Weinberg Gallery; Kitty Hawks, Photo by Eric Laignel; Vignette at Lin/Weinberg, c. 2002, Photo Lin/Weinberg; Lin/Weinberg booth at Modernism, c. 2002, Photo Lin/Weinberg; Part of the Lin/Weinberg collection, from Interior Design magazine, Photo by Eric Laignal; Winnie at Lin/Weinberg Gallery.

Larry Weinberg

People Who Live in Glass Houses

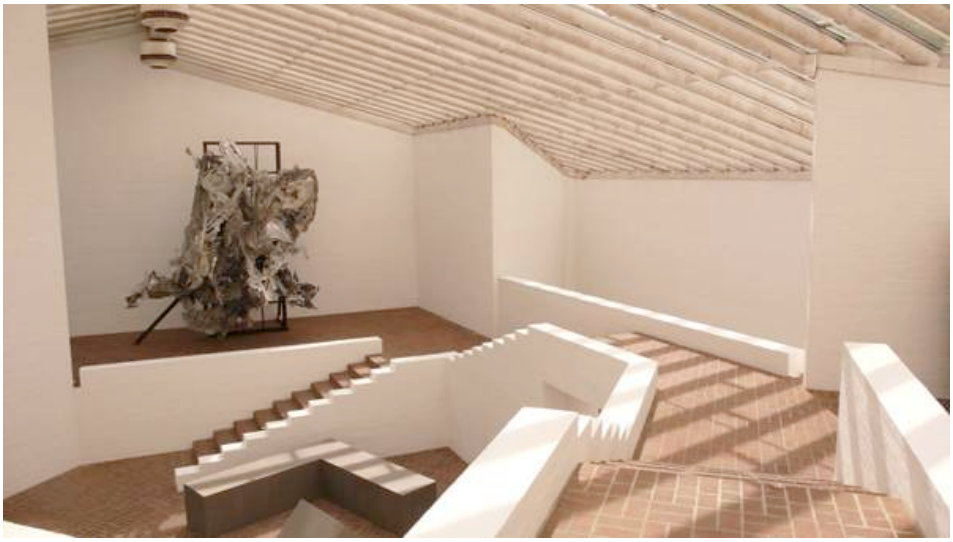
May 27, 2010

Thanks to an invitation from interior designer and friend, Brad Ford, I was able to tour Philip Johnson's Glass House last week, my first pilgrimage to a modernist icon outside of New York. The White Gods (Tom Wolfe's term for Gropius, Breuer, Mies, et al) were smiling on us-the day was warm and overcast, with enough sunlight for reflections and shadows.

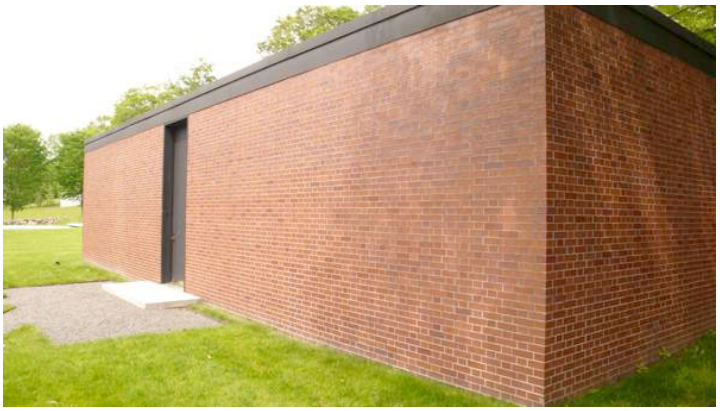
I entered the 47-acre property in New Caanan with an open mind, ready to be enchanted by the combination of natural and man-made beauty, and in this I was not disappointed. The story is that Johnson purchased the initial parcel five minutes after he

saw it, because of the promontory overlooking the woods and the pond. Built atop this promontory in 1949, the Glass House took the idea of a glass box, where the view became the walls, to an extreme: farther than the Eames house, which had about half glass and half multicolor panels in its cladding, and as far as Mies' Farnsworth House, built in 1951 but designed in 1945.

Walking around the Glass House, and the Brick House opposite it, the dynamic and avante garde elements are apparent: with its charcoal-painted steel I-beams and glass walls, the house disappears into the landscape as much as a house can. The relationship between inside and outside is fluid, influenced by lighting conditions and where you are standing. From outside especially, ever-changing reflections of trees make the view layered and complex. In some respects, this was something new and daring, and to the Beaux-Arts establishment, vaguely threatening.



Yet, the overweening impression at the estate is of classicism, or neo-classicism, and the direct representation or allusion to classical architecture. This is not a new observation, and Johnson's Wikipedia entry points to his classical scholarship at Harvard, and to his two grand tours of Europe. Surely, the stripped-down modernism of the Glass House and Brick House is more Doric than Corinthian, with the vertical steel I-beams and the row of tall trees behind the house referencing colonnades. Also, the



triangular paths between the house and the guest house govern the sight lines along 45-degree angles, a Greek practice. In more overt ways, the underground structure housing the painting collection has a façade based on Agamemnon's tomb on Mycenae, and the building housing the sculpture collection is a postmodern archaeological essay.

What all this means, I don't know, and when Johnson was alive, it didn't matter much, as it was after all a private residence. On one level, the Johnson estate makes a

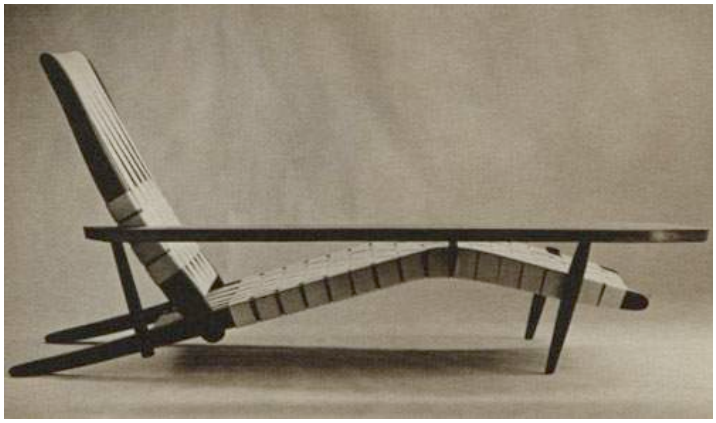
statement about the intimate connection between classicism and avant-garde modernism, a connection refuted for a time at least by most practicing modernists. In Johnson's life, the abiding relevance of history is tantamount, and this makes it harder to forget Johnson's more than brief flirtation with Nazism prior to WWII. Given Johnson's youthful fascistic tendencies, and given his bequest of the estate to the National Trust, what were private issues have become public matters. Did Johnson see himself as a citizen of the world or as emperor of his own domain? Was he referencing Greece of the Agora or Rome of Caesar's Palace? Was he aware that Agamemnon has been portrayed as stubborn and arrogant? That he left the estate to the common weal is a good sign; what exactly the estate signifies speaks to whether the bequest was an act of altruism or an inside joke.

Photography by Larry Weinberg.

What's in a Catalog? George Nakashima, 1962
May 6, 2010

Larry Weinberg

"Furniture, we feel, is a development of mood besides being purely utilitarian. Basic forms with the reflection of the constancy of nature find satisfaction in times like ours. A small poetic haven in an unsettled world where excitement seems so necessary."
George Nakashima, from his 1962 catalog



The 1962 Nakashima catalog shows the same artistry and meticulous attention to detail as his furniture. Like his tables, chairs, case pieces, and lamps, like his writing, architecture, and his business, it is suffused with his philosophy. Humility, simplicity, serenity, natural beauty, harmony, pride, dedication—all were a way of life to him. The catalog expresses his philosophy in its artful and well executed photographs and uncluttered layout, in the choice of fonts, the use of Japanese hand made wrappers, endpapers, and pages, and hand-sewn binding. It states his philosophy and his approach, succinctly, in its text.

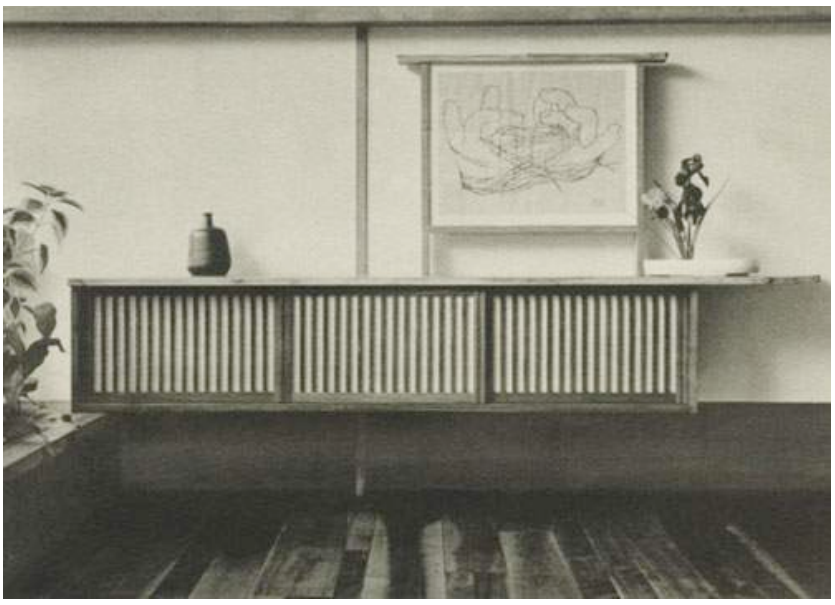
On craftsmanship and modern design:
"In a world where fine manual skills are shunned, we believe in them, not only in the act of producing a better product, but in the sheer joy of doing or becoming. We feel that pride in craftsmanship, of doing as perfect a job as possible, of producing something of

beauty even out of nature's discards, are all homely attributes that can be reconsidered. It might even be a question of regaining one's own soul when desire and megalomania are rampant…"

"In proportion to the flood of consumer goods, we are probably at one of the lowest ebbs of design excellence the world has seen. It requires a genuine fight to produce one well designed object of relatively permanent value."

On the idiosyncratic nature of his output:

"Many of our pieces are one-of-a-kind and cannot be reproduced nor accurately shown. They often depend on a particular board with extraordinary characteristics. Such boards are at times studied for years before a decision is made to its use, or a cut made at any point. Distinguishing features are fine figures in graining, burls, rich and deep coloring, unusual profiles, and even areas of decomposition."



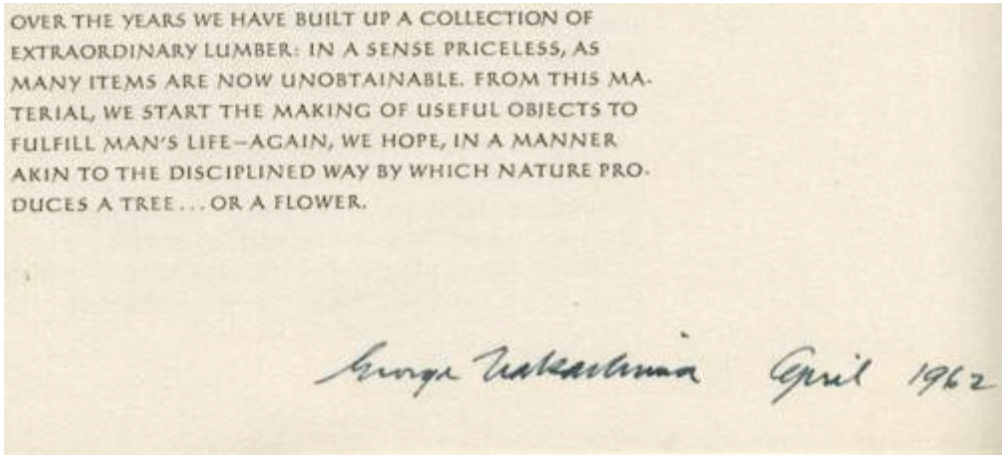
On using solid wood:

"Solid wood is a challenge. It is continually 'alive' and 'moves' depending on weather conditions, moisture content of the air, and temperature. Each board of each species is individual and must be understood; the good characteristics exploited."

And, significantly:
“Furniture should be lived with and not considered something overly precious.”

The Nakashima catalog is unlike any other I can think of. Part admonition, part jeremiad, it enjoins or challenges his customers to see things differently and to share with George his deep respect for craft traditions, nature, and the well-springs of creativity. Cost was not a formidable obstacle. The 1962 price list shows a Conoid triple chest with sliding doors selling for $360.00; a seven-foot hanging wall case with free-edge front for $350.00; a floor lamp for $105.00; a 66-inch slab coffee table for $150.00, a double pedestal desk for $225.00, and a New chair with rockers and arm for $125.00. This at a time when a Dunbar chest of similar size cost up to $1,500.00, a Herman Miller desk cost $500.00, and Eames aluminum group armchair cost $195.00. Clearly, on some level, George was at least as interested in getting his message across as turning a profit, or maybe he just enjoyed what he was doing.

The 1962 catalog shows George walking the walk as well as talking the talk; it is a document that embodies and projects what he is about, both in word and act.



Where's My Space Age
June 3, 2010

Larry Weinberg

I got around to perusing a design book this week that was on my summer reading list. Published in 2003, it's called "Where's My Space Age," by Sean Topham. Subtitled "The Rise and Fall of Futuristic Design," it traces the roots of the Space Age to WWII rocketry (Werner von Braun et al) and Cold War technological competition, though after a chapter on space flight it brings the disquisition down to earth with a long section on the impact of space-mania on 1960's living environments.

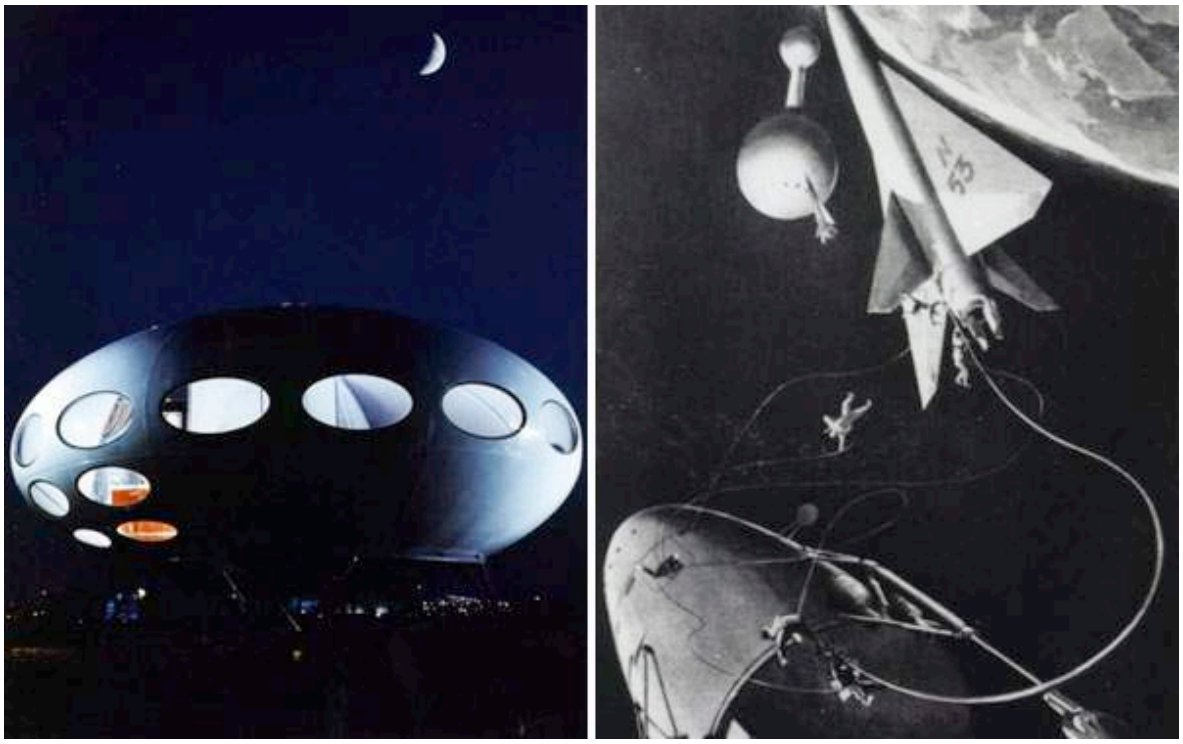
Rather than a book review, this is a book reaction, and that reaction is visceral. Topham sets the stage for his book with a comment from a 12-year-old boy on the eve of the lunar landing in 1969. I was ten at that moment, and so was a child when manned space flight went from dream to reality. Part of Topham's argument has to do with a child's sense of wonderment representing a broader cultural reaction to the exploration of space-he suggests the idea of a fresh start several times, and notes that space travel entered the home first in the form of children's toys.

It is hard for someone my age to look back at the imagery of the early postwar space age without a tinge of nostalgia, but look back we must because Topham argues, rightly,

how important visual information was in disseminating ideas about space travel. From Arthur Clarke's 1951 "The Exploration of Space" on, a succession of images prepared people for the coming conquest of space. Confidence, swagger, and technical mastery were suggested graphically, and awe was elicited with photos of rocket launches and breathtaking views from space. Shown here is a rendering from Clarke's factual rather than fictional account, and a shot of the jammed nose cone on Gemini 9.

This visual component was brought home, literally, by architects and designers during the 1960's. For Topham, the futuristic "look" of the 60's was deeply influenced by themes and imagery drawn from space, more directly in references to space helmets, space suits, satellites, and capsules, less directly in the use of aluminum--the material of early satellites--and perhaps the vivid blues of shots of earth from space. Moreover, space helped usher in an era characterized by disposability--multi-million dollar rockets were discarded after one use, as were paper dresses, while plastic chairs and tables would be replaced rather than repaired.

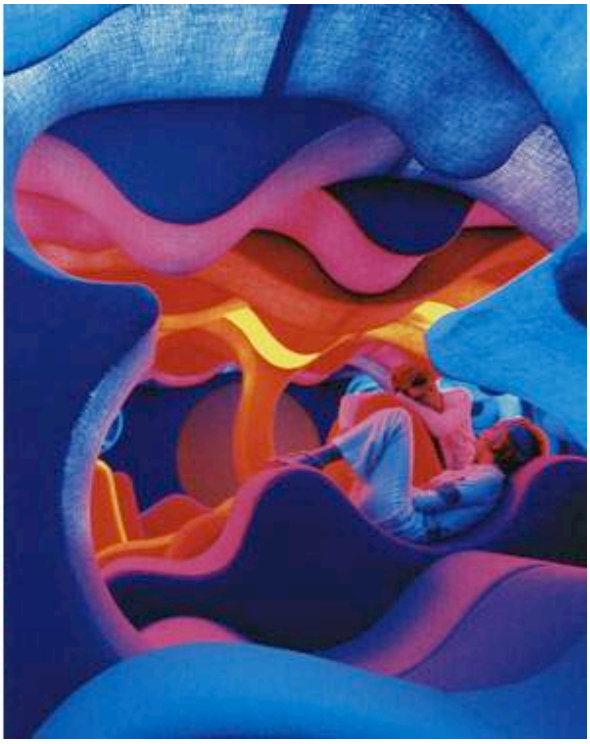
Topham illustrates a wide array of futuristic 60's design, including Haus-Rucker-Co's "Fly Head" (1968), shown here, but the essence of it, for him, can be distilled into Matti



Suuronen's ellipsoid Futuro House of 1968, and the furniture designs and interior landscapes of Verner Panton. Topham points out that the flying-saucer shaped Futuro House, shown here, which represents the concept of pod living, was designed as a transportable ski cabin. Panton's Visiona 2--depicted here--captured the exuberantly colorful and youthfully irrepressible (and irresponsible) character of space age design, while shifting styling from the clean lines inspired by spacecraft interiors to a more organic terrain--more "Barbarella" than "2001."

Ultimately, according to Topham, the era of space age design was undone by its own excesses and by the oil embargo and recession of the early 1970's--the cost of plastics rose with the price of oil, and a scenario of resource scarcity trumped the scenario of disposability. Curiously, Topham fails to bridge the idea of pod living into the era of sustainability. Surely, some notion of living in a compressed space, analogous to a spaceship or space capsule, remains relevant at a time when our greatest drain on resources comes from our egregiously outsized residences.

Ironically, the smallest prefab dwelling at a recent MoMA exhibition was intended as a ski cabin--40 years later, an idea of pod living still has to be couched in recreational terms.



The Sky Is Falling?

November 13, 2008

Larry Weinberg

We don't need Chicken Little to tell us that prices are falling in the art and design markets. Recent results at the Phillips de Pury & Company, Sotheby's and Christie's art auctions, and the Wright and Sollo/Rago design auctions, will suffice. With some exceptions—a Gris painting here, an Eames surfboard table there—the results have been dismal, even grim. Buy-in rates of up to 50 percent have been reported, as have tallies equaling less than half of the low estimates. We do not need Ben Bernacke to tell us that it is unrealistic to expect works of art to be immune to market forces. Marc Porter, president of Christie's in America, said just that earlier this month in an article in *The New York Times*, as did Richard Wright, of Wright Auction, in a conversation I had with him the week before.

Assets are assets, whether they are stocks, gold, oil, paintings, or chairs, so it is not surprising that a downward re-valuation is occurring in the art and design fields as the global economy sputters. What is surprising, as Richard Wright noted, is how fast the correction is taking place. In previous downturns (2001, 1987), there was a lag of up to several years for the pain to be felt in the art market. Now, the art and design markets are in lockstep with the broader economy, and are in something of a freefall since the demise of Lehman Brothers in September. Sotheby's has reported recent losses of $15 million—and rising—on guarantees given months ago (in what is now a halcyon economic period), echoing the fallout involving risk exposure in the financial sector. As with the equity markets, there will be winners and losers in the art and design fields, but a shakeout is clearly underway.

Nobody has a crystal ball, but Richard Wright and John Sollo (of Sollo/Rago) do have insight into the market for modern design. Both see a need to recalibrate prices to reflect market realities during what could be a protracted economic downturn. Tangibly, this means lowering reserves across the board, and downgrading sellers' expectations accordingly. Wright thinks reserves may have to be set "wildly" lower to get property to sell; he senses that values may fall upwards of fifty percent. Still, he thinks it will be healthier for the market to maintain liquidity rather than support previous price levels. And, when something sells low, a buyer gets a bargain. This is the flip side of the coin—pain for sellers translates to opportunities for buyers.

It remains to be seen whether A-plus material will continue to flow to the design auctions over the next months. Wright thinks it will, in part because design dealers and collectors are not as well capitalized as art dealers and collectors, and may need to sell. Sollo is not so sure. Clearly, this will be an interesting period to watch. Both Wright and Sollo know that change is coming to our part of the world, but neither is unduly pessimistic. Investors of all sorts may be sitting on their hands now, but it is still more comfortable to sit on a chair.

Chicken Little image courtesy of Walt Disney Pictures.

And the Winner is...YSL and Christie's

February 26, 2009

Larry Weinberg

The big winner this week was not *Slumdog Millionaire*, which garnered eight Oscars, nor was it Barack Obama, who gave a rousing address; the big winner was Christie's auction house, which rolled the dice on the YSL collection, and came up sevens. Of course, Pierre Berge, St. Laurent's long-time companion and heir, was also a big winner, as was the Berge-St. Laurent Foundation and AIDS research, which received most of the proceeds. Thomas Jayne, *Interior Design's* newest blogger, wrote eloquently on Tuesday about previewing the collection, concluding that it required a sense of humor to live amidst such a galaxy of brilliant objects. If so, St. Laurent and Berge surely had the last laugh, to the tune of roughly $484 million dollars.

This is a tidy sum in any circumstance, let alone in the teeth of a global financial crisis and a floundering art market. Broken down, the results are even more impressive: lot after lot sold well over high estimate, an astonishing 96 percent of the 733 lots found buyers, and world records were set at almost every session of the three-day sale. Some of the highlights include: a record for a single-collector sale ($7 million shy of being the highest-grossing auction ever); a record for a sale in Europe (achieved the first day); a record for silver, and a record for Art Deco, at $75 million.

The top lot at the sale was a 1911 canvas by Matisse, which sold for $46.4 million, well over

the high estimate of $23 million, and a record for the artist. “Madame LR,”an early work by Brancusi and an early acquisition by Berge and St. Laurent, brought $36.8 million, a record for the artist. Three paintings by Mondrian, representing three stages of his work, sold above high estimate, including “Composition avec bleu, rouge, jaune et noir,”which sold for $27.9 million, another record. Individual records were also achieved for Klee, Ensor, de Chirico, Ingres, Gericault, and Duchamp, whose ready-made brought $11.2 million, or five times the estimate.

Belle haleine - Eau de violette by Marcel Duchamp; Il Ritornante by Giorgio De Chirico

As well as the artworks fared, the most staggering result of the sale was the whopping $28.3 million shelled out, or to be shelled out, for Eileen Gray’s unique 1919 “Dragons” armchair. A pre-eminent example of Gray’s exotic, symbolist style no doubt, but a price tag that raised more than a few eyebrows. I’m not sure where the line between art and design is anymore, but it is no longer a matter of dollars and cents. The chair was purchased by Cheska Vallois, who sourced it originally from the estate of the couturier Suzanne Talbot, and I’m willing to assume she knows what she is doing. Two other Eileen Gray items sold in the stratosphere: the “Enfilade” cabinet, at $5.1 million, and the “Satellite” fixture, at $3.8 million. Records were easily achieved for works by Eckart Muthesius, Gustav Miklios, and even the much-venerated Jean Dunand. As usual, works by Claude and Francois-Xavier Lalanne were wildly underestimated. A set of 14 mirrors by Claude, commissioned by St. Laurent and Berge, and produced over an 11-year period, fetched $2.4 million, while the idiosyncratic YSL bar, commissioned in 1965, brought

$3.5 million. At the other end of the spectrum, a piece of quartz could be had for a mere $3,235.

Paire de banquettes by Gustave Miklos; Bar 'YSL' by Francois-Xavier Lalanne

Two off-notes marred an event deemed by acclamation the auction event of the century: the lot with the top estimate—an early Picasso—failed to sell, and the two Chinese bronzes from the Zodiac Temple did sell, for a combined $40 million, despite an official protest and legal contest by China. Pierre Berge was perplexed that the Picasso passed, but was consoled by raising a half-billion dollars for charity and having a Picasso to boot. A French high court ruled on behalf of Christie's in the matter of the two bronzes, purloined from the Zodiac Temple during the Second Opium War in 1860. Chinese officials were not pleased with this decision, and suggested that Christie's officials might have trouble passing building inspections in their planned Beijing office.

Despite this, the art and design world felt buoyant, if not giddy, for a few days. Experts hope the sale will give a depressed art market a much-needed boost. The signs are indeed encouraging: all it takes is world-class taste, bottomless pockets, an eponymous brand for cachet, and fifty years of commitment.

Top image: Yves St. Laurent from Rex Features. All auction images courtesy of Christie's.

Fauteuil aux Dragons by Eileen Gray

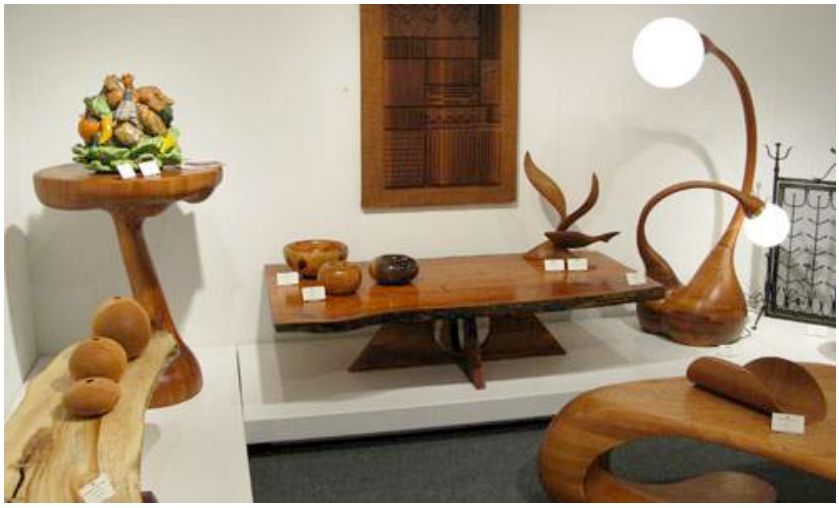
Larry Weinberg

SOFA, So Good

April 16, 2009

Memo to self: Next time you wrangle an invitation to a VIP preview party, try showing up. By the time I got to the opening gala for the SOFA show last night, the party was in full swing, and the line was three deep at the food table. Judging by the crowd, the fair would appear to be off to a good start. Times being what they are, though, the question is whether a decent gate will translate into decent sales. Kudos, nonetheless, to DMG World Media for staging a well-attended and rousing event.

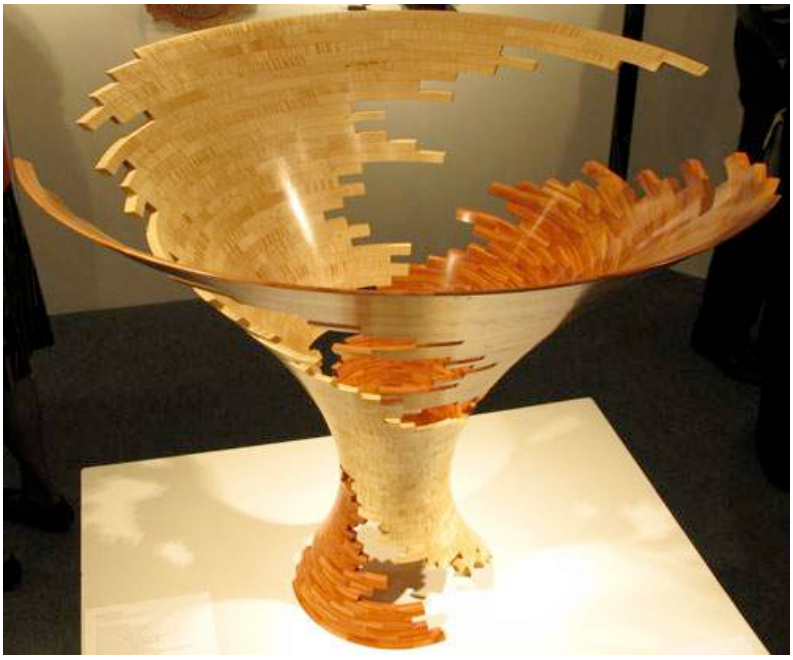
For those who don't know, SOFA is an acronym for Sculpture Objects & Functional Art, and that either clarifies things or doesn't. Now in its 12th year, SOFA provides a platform for craft-based design/art, running a gamut from



East to West, and mid-century to still-drying. Janus-faced by nature, the material at the show looks both forward and backward, with cutting-edge formal exploration often wed to traditional forms of artisanship. The offerings at the fair provoke a response, as often negative as positive, but it is hard not to find several things you like a lot.

Not surprisingly, I liked the display of vintage craft design at Moderne Gallery. The section I photographed shows works by George Nakashima, Wendell Castle, James Prestini, David Gilhooly, and an interesting and reasonably-priced wall sculpture by Ed Gerhardt.

Also photogenic, and shown here, are the displays of glass at Heller Gallery. Heller is presenting installations by Lino Tagliapietra and Steffen Dam. Tagliapietra, the consummate master of Venetian glass-blowing techniques, is represented by a few dozen highly colorful and often fanciful vessels. Dam is showing a half-dozen or so ensembles of what look like invertebrates and vegetation encased in glass. These imaginative miniature worlds, which evoke German Wunderkammer



and Victorian curio cabinets, are technically innovative and intricately crafted meditations on evolutionary science and beauty, on man's complex and often conflicting urges to know, collect, classify, wonder, and create.

If you feel an urge to collect, or just to wonder, the fair is running through Sunday, April 19 at the Park Avenue Armory.

From top: Lino Tagliapietra glass at Heller Gallery; the VIP Preview at SOFA; the Moderne Gallery booth; glass installation by Steffen Dam at Heller Gallery; wooden vessel by Bud Latven at del Mano Gallery; "Reincarnation" by Syoryu Honda at Tai Gallery; architect David Ling in front of the VIP lounge he designed. All photos by Larry Weinberg

Larry Weinberg

The Book, 1500-2009

April 9, 2009

Futurist and Constructivist pamphlets from Elizabeth Phillips

Over the past few decades, the Internet has altered the way people receive information, forcing publishing houses and newspapers to cut back or shut down. More recently, the digital reader has made further incursions into print territory. The newly-minted Kindle, engineered to look and feel more like a book, presents itself as a harbinger of things to come, as does Google's stated intent to scan and digitally disseminate vast numbers of so-called orphan books.

La Grant Monarchie de France *(1519) by Claude de Seyssel, from Librairie Benoit Forgeot*

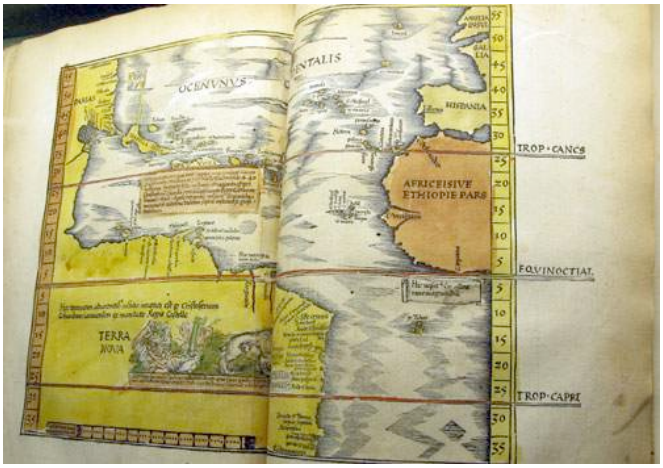
Still, if Sanford Smith's *NY Antiquarian Book Fair,* held this past weekend, is any indication, news of the demise of the book is premature. The book has been a near-perfect delivery system for ideas and information for over 500 years. The experience of reading printed matter is deeply ingrained in our cultural DNA, and the skeuomorphic character of the Kindle only substantiates this. Turf will, and should, be divided between digital and

print media, but the book is more than an assemblage of words, it is a cultural artifact and a piece of design as well. As long as art and history continue to matter to us, the book will remain relevant and valuable.

Astronomie Mechanica *(1598) by Tycho Brahe, from Dr. Jorn Gunther; signed*

The book fair made a compelling case for the book-as-object. The breadth and quality of the material was staggering, ranging in time from medieval to modern and in price from a few hundred to a few hundred thousand dollars, unless you count the first edition of Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium* of 1543, offered by Jonathan A. Hill Booksellers, which weighed in at $1.65 million.

The book arts, represented by illuminated manuscripts, printed and hand-colored maps, charts, and botanicals, and by the modern discipline of graphic design, were evident at every turn. Besides intrinsic beauty, the still-crisp and color-saturated images retain critical visual information that is remarkably free of degradation, in many cases after the passage of three or four centuries. I wonder if the same will hold true for the digital information being recorded now, given how data recording and storage technologies have changed in the past half century.



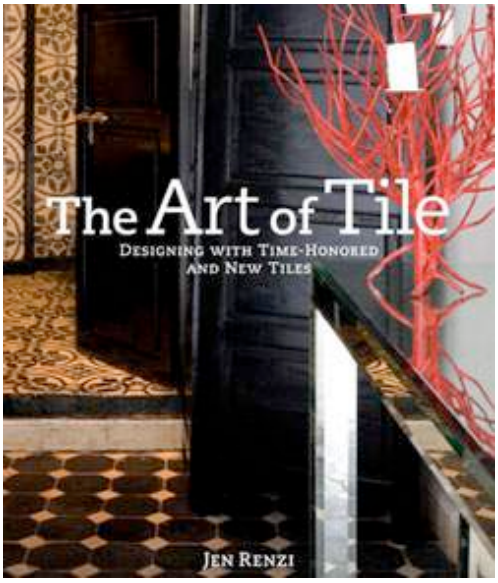
Atlas *(1525) by Ptolemaeus, from Olivier Pingel*

As an inveterate student of history, I was drawn, as always, to first editions of texts and novels. I'm aware that the texts themselves can be read digitally or in later editions, but the first edition is a direct link to the act of creation and itself provides clues to meaning.

Voyages and Travels *(1813) by George von Langsdorff, from Heritage Book Shop*

It was great to see Newton's *Principia Mathematica* of 1686 in Hellmut Schumann's booth, if only to acknowledge a tipping-point in the modern world view. Closer to home, geographically and linguistically, were Thomas Paine's C*ommon Sense* (an early American edition of 1776), and Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), both offered by William Reese Co., and a first edition, first-state of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859). Peter Stern had two first-edition novels I coveted: Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, with an inscription and the rare dust jacket. Likewise Jonkers Rare Books, which had George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Adrian Harrington Rare Books, which offered Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and Anthony Burgess' *Clockwork Orange*.

So, onward and upward for the book. This week, Yale University Press released Phyllis Ross' *Gilbert Rohde: Modern Design for Modern Living*. This long-awaited monograph fills a gap in design historiography. Also released this week is an eagerly anticipated work by Jen Renzi titled *The Art of Tile: Designing with Time-Honored and New Tiles*. Published by Clarkson Potter, it is billed as a comprehensive guide on how to choose tile for your home. If you are not on a first-name basis with Ann Sacks, Nemo, and Kaleidoscope, this book is for you.



Photographs by Larry Weinberg; *The Art of Tile* cover art courtesy of Clarkson Potter.

The Modernism Show: A Postscript

November 19, 2009

Larry Weinberg

Sanford Smith's Modernism Show, which took place this past weekend at the Park Avenue Armory, is an annual bellwether of the modern design market. For much of the past year, this market has been moribund, if not flat lined. I thought the story this week would be about realistic expectations, cautious selections, moderated pricing, and a general attitude of perseverance and stoicism among the dealers. I also thought I would find some interesting vignettes to shoot, as there is always much of visual interest at this show.

I was right about the vignettes, several of which are presented here. I was partly right about the rest. I heard one dealer at the opening talk about "hitting price points" this year, and in general it seemed the dealers were trying to hit it up the middle instead of swinging for the fences, as in past years. But the stoicism was giving way to an incipient optimism—a few weeks ago, Sotheby's impressionist and modern art sale went well over high estimate, a stunning result in this climate, and this quickly trickled down to design at Phillips' modern design sale on Saturday. At Modernism, I spoke with

dealers about these auguries, and heard about decent if not spectacular sales at the show, clients once again using black Amex cards at New York galleries, and a better mood among the crowd than last year. If this momentum carries forward to the December auctions, it might indeed point toward a thaw in the design markets.

Design can excite and challenge, but it can also soothe and calm. Soothing and calming was a good idea this year. The Jacksons, from Sweden, caught this mood and cashed in on it. At a glance, their booth looked comfortable, solid, understated, and inviting. The focal point was a Frits Henningsen armchair, the old leather burnished like a worn-in baseball glove or well-worn shoe. Closer inspection revealed that the handsome fixture hanging nearby was a Gunnar Asplund commission, rare and valuable, but this is beside the point. Visual and tactile comfort is as much a hallmark of Swedish design as grace and elegance. Unlike avant-garde modernisms, where the past had to be forgotten before it was remembered, Swedish modernism maintained an easy dialogue with tradition and history, with the familiar, and this message radiated outward. The Jackson's success at this year's show points to both the timelessness and the timeliness of this

design heritage.

On to the vignettes: in George Gilpin's booth, I shot the wall unit he designed and built (custom fabrication is his day job)—sort of Alexander Girard meets "Hollywood Squares," filled with Eames and Nelson pieces for color and pizzaz. Z Modern, from Denver, brought a 1990's mobile by George Rickey, which anchored an interesting shot.

In Good Design, there was a sinuous contemporary cabinet by Antoine Schapira topped by a vintage Carlo Scarpa fixture for Venini. At Mondo Cane, I shot an installation of Stilonvo sconces (which sold, as a group), while at Galere, of West Palm Beach, I caught a Pedro Friedeberg plaque in situ. At Caira Mandaglio, the British gallery, a contemporary cabinet by Roberto Guilio Rida plugged in seamlessly with vintage pieces by Ico Parisi, Gio Ponti, Mario Quarti, and Fornasetti.