

COLLECTING

true to type

Multitalented graphic designer Elaine Lustig Cohen brought the same rigorous sense of style to the book covers, interiors, and artworks she created

Elaine Lustig Cohen (1927-2016) was an American graphic designer of book covers, museum catalogs, and corporate-identity packages whose career flowered after the 1955 death of her first husband and mentor, the midcentury polymath Alvin Lustig. She and her second husband, author/publisher Arthur Cohen, also achieved acclaim as the proprietors of Ex Libris, a pioneering

designer—passions she shared with Cohen—that culminated in the decoration of the Upper East Side townhouse the couple purchased in 1961. This townhouse is a *gesamtkunstwerk* combining all her interests in sophisticated interiors rivalling those of her contemporaries Florence Knoll and Estelle Laverne. Early photographs of the living room reveal vistas as clean as her concurrent abstract graphic



rare-book dealership in the field of 20th-century European and Russian avant-garde design. And she is becoming better known as a painter, sculptor, and collagist thanks to "Masterpieces & Curiosities: Elaine Lustig Cohen," an exhibition at the Jewish Museum that runs through August 11, 2019.

Less exposed are her endeavors as a collector and interior

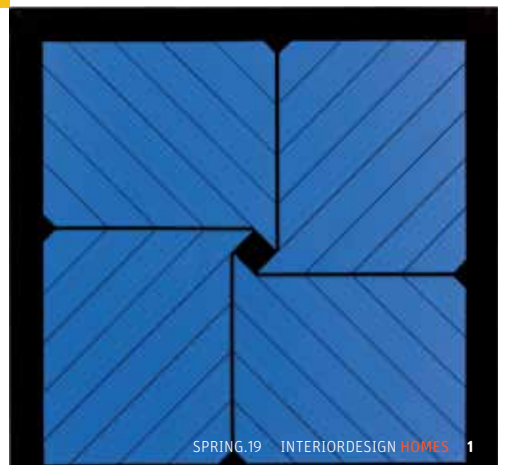
work for the Jewish Museum, yet leavened with a catholic array of objects, both collected and created. Later photos show vignettes as carefully composed as the collages she began making in the 1980s out of avant-garde ephemera.

The Cohens collected extensively: pre-Columbian, tribal, ancient, and modern abstract art; African beads and combs; Kachina dolls; ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: JASON MANDELLA PHOTOGRAPHY; PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN; COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN (A).

Clockwise from top right: Elaine and Arthur Cohen, circa 1965. Untitled acrylic on canvas, 1967. Color Box, 1981, in acrylic-painted wood. Logo for Frederick Lunning/Georg Jensen, 1960. Cover design for the Jewish Museum exhibition catalog "Primary Structures," 1966.



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Czech pre-war air-brushed pottery; and Bakelite jewelry. Rare books on Constructivism, de Stijl, Dada, Futurism, Surrealism, and the Bauhaus filled floor-to-ceiling bookcases. Art director/critic Steven Heller's observation that Lustig Cohen's graphic work integrated

Lustig Cohen's own creations also populated the house: a marble dining table with tubular chrome legs and walnut extensions channeling Philip Johnson and Le Corbusier, an adjustable wall lamp with conical visors based on Alvin Lustig commissions,

groundbreaking catalogs she designed for the Jewish Museum between 1963 and 1968. "Primary Structures," from a 1966 exhibition introducing Minimalism, is the jewel, with first editions fetching north of \$1,000. Second editions, and most of the other titles, range

inventory itself was partially dispersed by Lustig Cohen, but a chunk from the estate went to the New York bookstore Anartist, which still has numerous items with prices beginning under \$25. I am fortunate to be handling some of the townhouse furnishings



"European avant-garde and modernist influences into a distinctly American, midcentury manner of typographic communication" applies to her interior design, too. The townhouse furnishings included Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chairs, an original Gerrit Rietveld Zig-Zag chair, an early Marcel Breuer side table, two 1930s Werner Max Moser tubular steel chairs for the Swiss firm Embru, Massimo and Lella Vignelli Saratoga chairs, and a circa 1915 Peter Behrens pendant fixture.

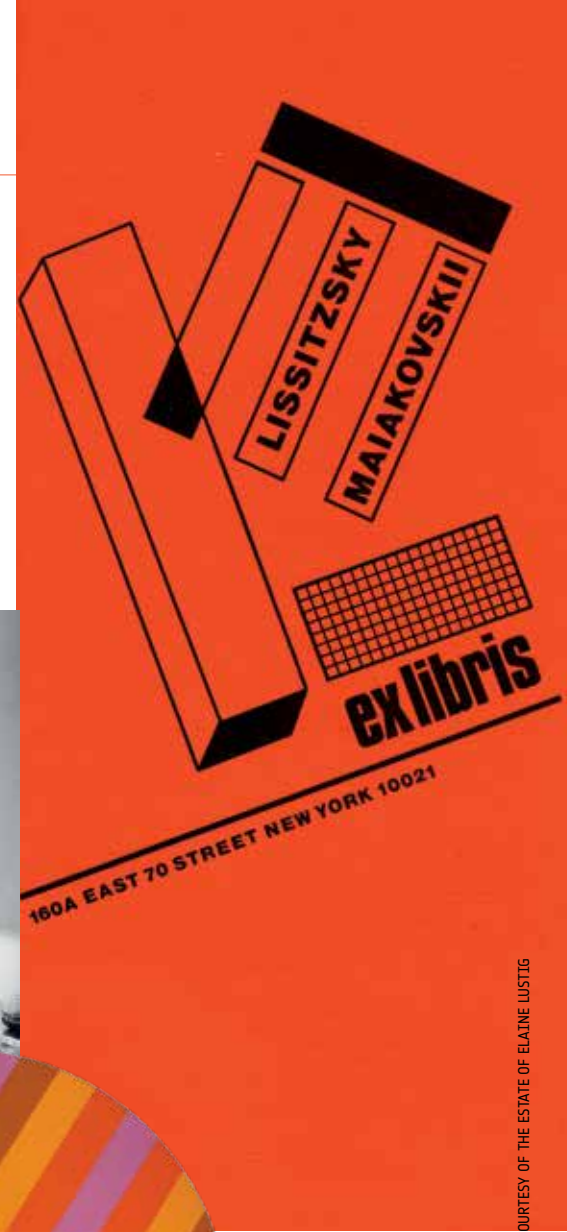
a dome-shaped sconce, and several two-tone credenzas. A rotating gallery of her paintings and collages occupied the walls, while her colorful painted boxes and wood sculptures were carefully arranged on available surfaces.

what to collect

The best entry point for collecting Lustig Cohen is her commercial graphic design. Book covers for New Directions and Meridian Books start at under \$10 in paperback. Up the ladder are the roughly twenty

from \$20 to \$175. Consider also her corporate identity work when it surfaces. Ex Libris, founded in 1972 and run out of the townhouse for two decades, produced nineteen major numbered catalogs and a slew of smaller catalogs and brochures designed either by Lustig Cohen or her daughter, Tamar Cohen. These remain essential reference guides to important avant-garde modernist books and ephemera. Prices range from \$10 to \$150. The

designed or collected by Lustig Cohen, including the one-off wall lamps, the marble dining table, and the Embru chairs. Her artwork, done largely for herself, was nonetheless shown regularly at New York and Los Angeles galleries (Mary Boone Gal-



FROM LEFT: LOUIS REENS/COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN. COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN. FROM RIGHT: JOSHUA MCHUGH (2). COURTESY OF THE ESTATE OF ELAINE LUSTIG COHEN (14).

tips

See the Jewish Museum exhibition and scour the website dedicated to her work, elainelustigcohen.com. Scavenge online platforms such as abebooks.com and eBay for her graphic design. Search using her name and also specific titles—prices might be lower if she goes uncredited. Make sure the dust jacket is included on hardcovers! And keep an eye out for her paintings, sculpture, and collages down the line. —Lawrence Weinberg

Clockwise from top right: The master bedroom, photographed in 2016, with Kachina doll–prapped shelves, a cabinet designed by Lustig Cohen, a circa 1904 Bruno Mathsson lounge and ottoman, a Firma Karl Mathsson book stand, and a 1990s Holtkötter Leuchten floor lamp. In the dining area, a Gerrit Rietveld Zig-Zag chair joins a cabinet and collage by Lustig Cohen (topped with Egyptian Ibis and Corinthian helmet). Clear Writing book jacket, 1961. Sewing box prototype, 1983, in lacquered wood and chrome. Cover design for "A New Aesthetic," 1967, at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art. "Dada Now & Forever," 1981, from the Ex Libris catalog.



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