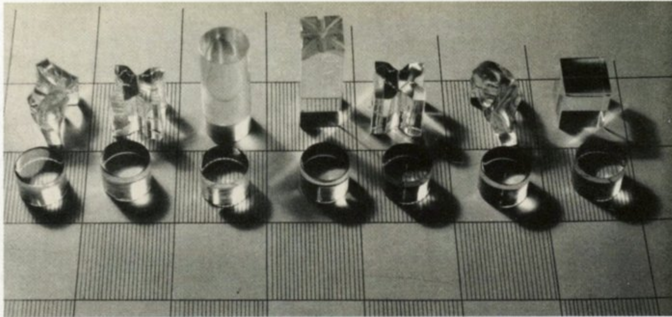
The Quiet Man

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

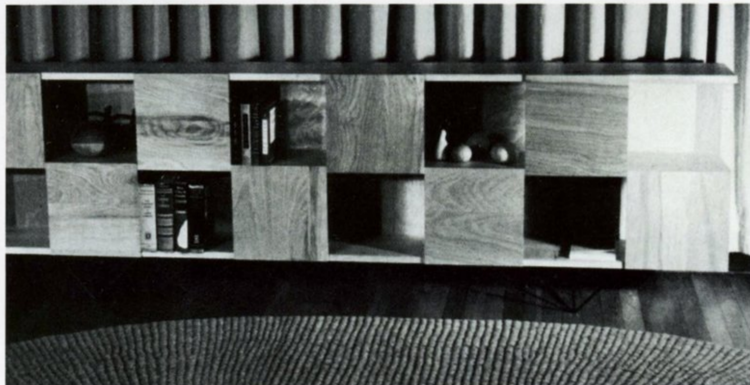


From top: **Three Richard Filipowski designs a Lucite chess set designed in 1942; a late 1950s floor lamp with a pyramidal parchment shade; and a 1955 sideboard with checkerboard-like open-and-closed-block fronting.**

AN IMAGINARY PHOTOMONTAGE of the leading modernists at work in mid-century Chicago and Boston, two nerve centers of the movement, would show gatherings of giants: artists and designers such as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Gyorgy Kepes rubbing shoulders with architects Serge Chermayeff, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Pietro Belluschi, along with the quixotic theoretician Buckminster Fuller. But each shot would include another figure, probably keeping himself in the background, but welcome on the stage all the same. His name was Richard Filipowski.

Filip, as he was known to many friends, was one of the most gifted polymaths in the annals of modernism in America. Each aspect of his creativity informed the others. He taught a Bauhaus-inspired visual design course at M.I.T. for thirty-six years, and was an accomplished furniture designer, devising pieces that are at once deceptively simple aesthetically, yet structurally complex. If he had a low profile in the world of modernist design, those who knew Filipowski, who died in 2008, suggest it was partly by inclination. His deepest passion was for art, which he explored in abstract paintings and sculpture that reflected what he termed the "art of the psyche." Such work turned him inward toward self-exploration, and away from worldly judgment and the quest for rewards.

Filipowski was born in Poland in 1923 and his family immigrated to Canada when he was four years old. According to George Filipowski, Richard's younger brother and the caretaker of his estate and legacy, Filip had a natural talent for drawing. He wanted an art education, but one that took him beyond the classical training he received in high school in Toronto. By happenstance, a friend turned up a copy of the catalogue for the 1938 Bauhaus exhibition held at New York's Museum of Modern Art. It was love at first sight. In 1941, at age eighteen, Filip wrote to Moholy-Nagy—who had taught



LARRY WEINBERG PHOTOS ARCHIVAL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE RICHARD FILIPOWSKI TRUST

the foundation course at the Bauhaus, instructing students in disciplines ranging from painting to metalwork—and was by then head of Chicago's Institute of Design. Filipowski was sufficiently impressive to be accepted to the school, and he began his studies there in 1942.

Filipowski's relationship with Moholy did not begin well. According to his brother, it took Filipowski some time to acclimate himself to the coursework at the Institute. He did not understand

Moholy's teaching methods, became increasingly frustrated, and considered leaving the school. But clearly Moholy never had doubts about his student. He included three of Filipowski's projects in his seminal text *Vision in Motion*, published in 1947, including a Lucite chess set that he praised for its transparent beauty and the fact that the shapes of the pieces indicate the way they move. The bishops are shaped as Xs, for example; the rooks are simple cubes. (The chess set was included in the 1944 exhibition *Imagery of Chess* at New York's Julien Levy Gallery. Among the other artists featured in this show were Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Alexander Calder, and Isamu Noguchi.) More significant, perhaps, is the fact that in 1946, when Moholy was suffering from leukemia—he would pass away in November of that year—he asked Filipowski to teach at the Institute. He was the only student to whom Moholy ever extended such an invitation.

Filipowski taught foundation courses at the school from 1946 until 1950, continuing Moholy's curriculum of integrating technology and industry into art, and art into life. In 1950 he was lured to Boston by Walter Gropius—the connection was made by Serge Chermayeff—to develop and direct a "Fundamentals of Design" program at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The two had a good working relationship and friendship, but the program Filipowski oversaw was terminated after two years by Joseph Hudnut, dean of the graduate school, who rarely saw eye to eye with Gropius.

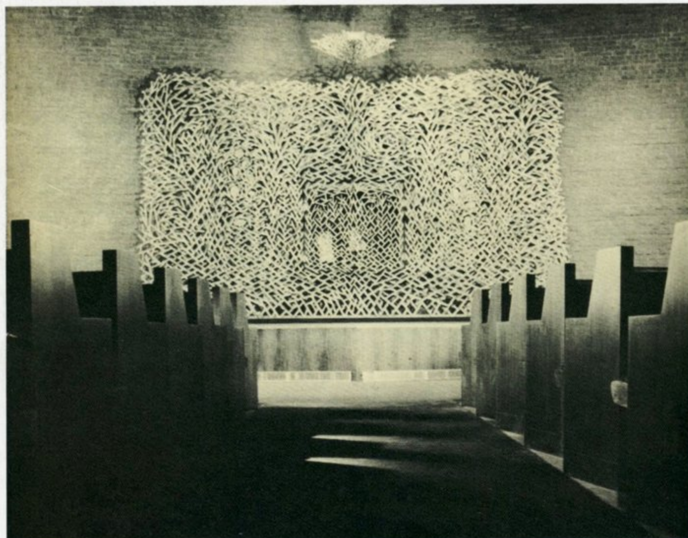
M.I.T. snapped Filipowski up quickly, and there he created an influential and pioneering course on design theory. Richard Dattner, a prominent New York architect, was a student at M.I.T. in the mid-1950s, and offers insights into Filipowski the teacher. He was, Dattner recalls, an incisive critic given to provoking and challenging his students. Despite an often gruff and cranky disposition Filipowski truly cared about his students. He could be blunt in his judgments, but he was not mean-spirited; he acted out of respect for the work. In the same spirit of honesty, Dattner points out that Filipowski was somewhat marginalized at M.I.T.—the stars of the faculty were Kepes and the architects Belluschi and Lawrence

A 1940s aluminum sculpture (top) demonstrates the experiments with cutting and bending a single sheet of material that led Filipowski to design a bent plywood chair (below) that he entered in a 1950 MoMA competition.

Anderson. Dattner suggests that Filipowski might have been closer to his students because he was lower on the totem pole, and has himself always taken to heart the tenets he says his teacher emphasized: "Sensitivity to materials, respect for simple design, interest in how the world is put together, and design for everyday life."

If as a teacher Filipowski was somewhat flinty, you can surmise, fairly, that he possibly felt a simmering resentment about the time teaching took from his art.

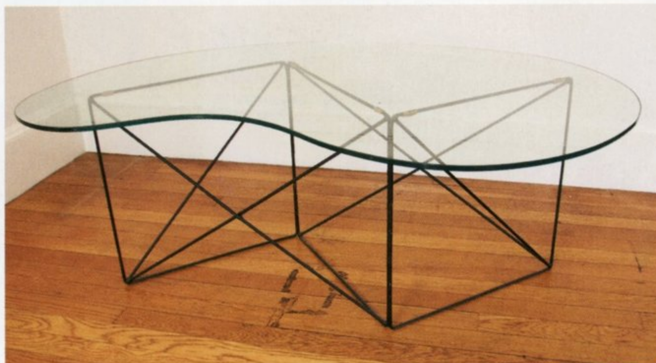
"TO FILIPOWSKI, VISUAL LITERACY WAS AS IMPORTANT AS VERBAL LITERACY IN **APPREHENDING AND FUNCTIONING IN THE MODERN WORLD**



From his earliest years studying such subjects as physics and architecture in Chicago, he simultaneously pursued his interest in painting and sculpture. And his work received attention. From the late 1940s onward, Filipowski was the subject of numerous solo exhibitions, and his work was displayed in a succession of group shows as well. He abandoned painting in the early 1960s in favor of sculpture, but later returned to painting, and continued working in both two- and three- dimensional media until his death.

His early paintings and aluminum sculptures bear a resemblance to those of his fellow Institute of Design student Angelo Testa—both took cues from the constructivism of their mentor, Moholy. Filipowski's later metal sculptures conjure Harry Bertoia and his assistant Klaus Ihlenfeld in their rhythms and lush naturalism. His self-acknowledged masterwork is the Ark for Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, a Pietro Belluschi project completed in 1962. Here, according to Temple literature, the dense forestation of the welded oblong elements in the sculpture conveys a spiritual message affirming human potential and development—"seed pods for future growth."

In 1969 Filipowski laid out his ideas about art and education in a lecture titled "The Art Phobia in Our Society." In it he laments the state of art education in the United States, citing a general lack of visual literacy and an aversion to self-expression as the root causes



Top: **The backrest and seat of a Filipowski side chair connote simplicity while the metal struts of the base convey strength.**

Center: **Filipowski considered the 1962 welded-metal Ark of the Temple B'rith Kodesh in Rochester, New York, to be his artistic masterwork.**

Right: **The table offers a witty juxtaposition between the biomorphic top and the hard geometric forms suggested by the base.**

of all ugliness and disorder. To Filipowski, visual literacy was as important as verbal literacy in apprehending and functioning in the modern world. To rectify the situation, he advocated universal art instruction in secondary school and public art galleries in every town.

Filipowski's design career was relatively short-lived—most of his pieces were executed between the mid-1940s and the mid-1950s—but it developed organically out of his design education and his catholic curiosity. The relentless experimentation in different materials and fields of work, so much a part of the Bauhaus tradition, was second nature to him. A freestanding sculpture, cut and bent from a sheet of aluminum, done for a class project in 1945, became the inspiration for a chair, cut and bent from a single sheet of plywood, and submitted to the 1950 MoMA "Low Cost Furniture" competition. The plywood chair is an extraordinary piece of design, starkly sculptural yet animated, and conceptually elegant. True to form, in its May 8, 1950, article about the competition, *Life* magazine—relentlessly middlebrow—lumped Filipowski's chair into the "weird losers" category.

It took the intrepid, questing Italian design community to recognize the merits of Filipowski's work. The editors of reviews such as *L'Arredamento Moderno* and *Esempi* were human divining rods for visual quality and innovation. They were early champions of Vladimir Kagan, before his commercial success; they also spotted visionary potential in designers such as Otto Kolb, who, like Filipowski, did not get his most interesting work into production. At least three of Filipowski's designs were shown in these high-minded Italian publications—no small achievement for a fledgling designer with a different day job and another calling. In 1955 *L'Arredamento Moderno* featured a handsome and chic Filipowski sideboard with hairpin legs and open-and-closed-block fronting. The rakishly horizontal proportions of the sideboard and its ordered rows of dark and light square elements are reminiscent of a chess board, and it doesn't take a great leap of imagination to see the piece as a direct descendant of the

Two views of a sofa made in the late 1950s demonstrate the way Filipowski designed furnishings so that the character of a piece changes depending both on how it is placed and the shifting vantage points from which it is seen.

Top: **A bronze sculpture from the naturalistic phase of Filipowski's artistic career, which began in the early 1960s.**

Right: **A constructivist oil on canvas dates from 1946, when Filipowski was a student of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.**

Below: **The late 1950s dining table was featured in the Italian design magazine *Esempi*.**

Lucite chess set made more than a decade earlier.

The photographs shown in the magazines make for a telling aside. All were taken in the same setting, most likely Filipowski's own living room, using curtains and a rug as backdrops, and books and vases for accents. These were not snapshots, but carefully staged images, clearly indicating that Filipowski had an interest in publishing, if not producing, his designs. According to George, his brother was interested in marketing his pieces, going so far as to print business cards that read "Custom Furniture," and creating two lines of basic,

> AS A TEACHER HE COULD BE BLUNT IN HIS JUDGMENTS, BUT NOT MEAN-SPIRITED: **HE ACTED OUT OF RESPECT FOR THE WORK**

rather pedestrian, assemble-it-yourself furnishings. But limning a painting or writing a lecture is one thing; producing and distributing furniture is another. Even George acknowledges that Filipowski and his partners lacked the business acumen for such a venture.

Perhaps the best way to view Filipowski's design work is as a hobby with an upside. His output was basically limited to a series of prototypes. Like many designers of modest means, he designed and made much of his own furniture. His Lexington, Massachusetts, home, only recently sold, was a repository of his paintings, metal sculptures, and furnishings. His own designs include a sofa, a chair, a bench, a coffee table, a dining table, and some lamps, all with fretwork or metal strut bases; and an outdoor grouping of metal chairs, some wooden stools, and several occasional tables. It is a testament to his visual sensibility that they group easily into vignettes—the sculptures, paintings, and furnishings go well together.

The floor lamp may be the most successful design, by virtue of its aesthetic and material clarity. There is a well-proportioned minimalism to the piece, with its wire stand and a boldly pyramidal shade made of parchment. The elements that make up the larger furnishings, however, are a study in contrasts. Take the seating pieces: the chair and sofa backs and seats are simple slabs of plywood that make no reference to human contours. It is the complex strut bases of the pieces that fascinates.

In working on his bases Filipowski applied lessons learned from Moholy and Buckminster Fuller—with whom he overlapped at both the Institute of Design and M.I.T.—as well as his own mathematical and architectural aptitude. The question Filip posed might be this: what if we take the underlying unity of the geometrically and physically stable triangle/tetrahedron, and make it more visually kinetic? The intersecting wire struts of the bases elongate or compress, hide or reveal, simplify or complicate, depending upon the position of the viewer—Moholy's "vision-in-motion." Juxtaposed in a group, the strut pieces offer a unifying triangular theme, yet also provide a dynamic and varying visual experience based on the placement of the pieces. This maintains a sense of order on the one hand, while avoiding repetition and boredom on the other.

Had Filipowski continued his experiments in furniture design, he might have become more of a household name. He had all the tools: a fertile visual imagination coupled with a mathematical bent, a working knowledge of materials, and a gift for rendering. But Filipowski clearly saw himself as an artist of the psyche first, a teacher second, and a designer only third. M