



American Federation of Arts

For Immediate Release

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EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN MODERN DESIGN EXAMINED IN MAJOR TRAVELING EXHIBITION
AMERICAN MODERN, 1925–1940: DESIGN FOR A NEW AGE

(August 2000)–***American Modern, 1925–1940: Design for a New Age***, an exhibition tracing the rise of a distinctively American modern design aesthetic through the efforts of approximately 50 of its creative pioneers, begins its national tour at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it remains on view through January 7, 2001 and will travel subsequently to five museums in the United States (see page 4 for tour itinerary).

The exhibition is organized by The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the American Federation of Arts. Support has been provided by the National Patrons of the AFA. In New York, the exhibition was made possible by the William Randolph Hearst Foundation.

Drawn exclusively from the museum's collection and from the John C. Waddell Collection, a major promised gift to the Metropolitan, this landmark exhibition features more than 150 objects—including furniture, clocks, appliances, posters, textiles, radios, tableware, and even a bathroom sink—by such leading designers as Norman Bel Geddes, Donald Deskey, Paul Frankl, Raymond Loewy, Isamu Noguchi, Eliel Saarinen, Walter Dorwin Teague, Walter von Nessen, and Russel Wright. Installed chronologically and thematically, ***American Modern*** reveals how these and other key innovators of the period, while at first dependent on contemporary modernist design movements in France, Germany, and Scandinavia, ultimately forged a style that was at once modern and unmistakably American.

"The Metropolitan Museum has collected and exhibited the works of American designers for more than a century, amassing an extraordinary collection," said J. Stewart Johnson, Consultant for Design and Architecture in the Metropolitan's Department of Modern Art and AFA's guest curator of the exhibition. "The inclusion of more than 100 pieces from the magnificent John C. Waddell Collection adds immeasurably to ***American Modern*** in terms of documenting the development of a uniquely American design aesthetic between the world wars."

A key event initiating the modern design movement in America was the great 1925 Paris *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Modernes*. The United States was offered a prime location in this showcase, which provided the participants with an opportunity to demonstrate the skill and latest achievements of their nation's craftsmen and manufacturers. The organizers, however, stipulated that works admitted to the *Exposition* must show "new inspiration and real originality" and be representative of "the modern decorative and industrial arts. Reproductions, imitations, and counterfeits of ancient styles [were] strictly prohibited." Reluctantly, the United States declined the invitation; after consultation with major establishment figures in the art and education worlds, it was concluded that there was no modern design in America.

The 1925 exhibition was a clarion call for American design, and over the next 15 years dramatic changes occurred. Not only designers and manufacturers, but department stores, museums, and galleries joined in an effort to promote innovative work and overcome the generally conservative and historically oriented level of consumer taste in America.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art played an active role in this effort, both through its collections and through a series of historic exhibitions devoted to the latest achievements in contemporary American design. A number of works featured in *American Modern* were seen first by the public in the galleries of the museum. The AFA also organized numerous industrial-design exhibitions between the World Wars.

At first much of America's "modernist" design reflected the catalytic influence of the Paris fair, which brought to international prominence the chic new French luxury style known as Art Deco. The exhibition opens with several examples of this phase in American design.

Soon, however, America's most innovative designers had moved away from the self-conscious elegance and ostentation of Art Deco toward the clean uncluttered lines, pure geometric forms, and machine-made materials espoused by Germany's Bauhaus. Unlike French Art Deco, which catered to a leisured clientele, the Bauhaus forged an alliance between art and industry, the aim of which was to create objects that were both attractive and affordable for the masses. The onset of the Depression only served to enhance the appeal of Bauhaus design theory and practices in this country.

The Bauhaus model also fostered the rise to prominence in America of industrial designers whose creations were intended to be machine-made and mass-produced. Walter Dorwin Teague, one of this country's first and most famous industrial designers, is represented in the exhibition by some 18 objects, including a square centerpiece and spherical vase designed in 1932 for Corning Glass Works' Steuben Division. Hungarian-born Ilonka Karasz's pair of cone-shaped bowls (ca. 1930), made of electroplated nickel silver and resting on stands made of crossed metal plates, also catered to the taste for mathematical precision and a machine-made look.

Finnish architect-designer Eliel Saarinen, who immigrated to the United States in 1923, brought a new elegance, subtlety, and sophistication to American modernist design. He is represented in the exhibition by several important works, the most celebrated of which is *Tea and Coffee Urn and Tray* (ca. 1934). The spherical urn, mounted on an openwork cylindrical stand and decorated with a delicate vertical finial, combines modernist geometric aesthetics with a classical sense of proportion and ornament.

As American designers absorbed and profited from European influences, they also sought ways to give their work an unmistakably American stamp. One important response was provided by Paul Frankl. His *"Skyscraper" Bookcase* (ca. 1927), with its strong vertical lines and staggered setbacks, is a witty evocation of the Manhattan skyline that spawned a whole rash of skyscraper-related objects. A number of these, including candleholders, cocktail shakers, coffee services, and textiles are included in the exhibition.

Ultimately, the skyscraper motif in American design proved too extreme and eccentric to have a lasting and broad application. Nevertheless, the clean, contemporary, and very American look paved the way for streamlining. Developed by aerodynamic engineers as a means of minimizing air resistance, streamlining, with its bullet profiles and flowing lines, not only made objects move faster—it made them look fast. In a nation increasingly enamored with speed and power, streamlining seemed to evoke what was best and brightest about America's future.

During the 1930s, streamlining was applied, logically enough, to planes, cars, and trains, as well as to an extraordinarily wide range of household objects, many of which led quite stationary lives—for example, Kem Weber's *"Airline" Armchair* (ca. 1934); Lurelle Guild's *"Electrolux, Model 30" Vacuum Cleaner* (1937), which, despite its resemblance to a speeding locomotive, still had to be pulled along the carpet by its user; and Egmont Arens's *"Streamliner" Meat Slicer* (designed 1940).

Norman Bel Geddes, another versatile designer, is represented by a number of objects, including his rocket-shaped *"Soda King" Syphon Bottles* (1938) and his *"Patriot" Radio* (1940), the face of which resembles the stars and stripes of the American flag.

By 1940 a noticeable shift had occurred in American taste. The vogue for dynamism, speed, and sophistication had given way to a more relaxed approach that valued comfort. The Scandinavian emphasis

on softer, organic shapes, designed to conform more closely to the human hand and body, was taken up with brilliant success by Russel Wright. His line of "American Modern" Dinnerware, which debuted in 1937 and ultimately sold more than 80 million pieces, is included in the exhibition, along with J. Robert F. Swanson's maple and stainless steel "Flexible Home Arrangements" Nesting Tables (ca. 1940), and "user-friendly" kitchen utensils, including a spoon and potato masher (1934) by Henry Dreyfuss.

As the 20th century reached midpoint, designers had found a middle ground, encompassing both the precision of the machine aesthetic and the nostalgic warmth of handcraftsmanship. Responding to an array of economic and social as well as aesthetic influences, they could take pride in providing the nation with designs that were practical, livable, and comfortable; quintessential American virtues and attributes that in time would come to transform the American domestic landscape.

PUBLICATION

An illustrated catalogue, published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. in association with the American Federation of Arts, accompanies the exhibition. *American Modern, 1925-1940: Design for a New Age* features an essay by J. Stewart Johnson examining the development of modern design in the United States and public reaction to it; biographical entries on each of the designers whose work is included in the exhibition; an appendix explaining new materials developed during this period; and a comprehensive bibliography. 192 pages, 9 3/4 x 9 3/4 inches, 170 illustrations, 140 in full color. Clothbound \$39.95; paperbound \$29.95.

NATIONAL TOUR

Orange County Museum of Art
May 25–August 19, 2001
Newport Beach, CA

Flint Institute of Arts
September 14–December 16, 2001
Flint, MI

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
January 11–April 7, 2002
Philadelphia, PA

Mint Museum of Craft + Design
May 3–July 28, 2002
Charlotte, NC

Philbrook Museum of Art
August 23–November 17, 2002
Tulsa, OK

As museum schedules are subject to change, please confirm dates before going to press.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS: Founded by an act of Congress in 1909, the AFA is the nation's oldest and most comprehensive non-profit art museum service organization. The AFA provides its more than 550 member institutions with traveling art exhibitions and educational, professional, and technical support programs developed in collaboration with the museum community. Through these programs, the AFA seeks to strengthen the ability of museums to enrich the public's experience and understanding of art.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART: The Metropolitan Museum of Art is one of the world's largest and finest art museums. Its collections include more than two million works of art spanning 5,000 years of world culture, from prehistory to the present and from every part of the globe. Founded in 1870, the Metropolitan Museum is located in New York City's Central Park along Fifth Avenue. Last year the museum was visited by 5.2 million people. www.metmuseum.org.