

Rethinking American Modernist Design, 1920-1940: Guest Editor's Introduction

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The articles gathered together for this special issue of *Studies in the Decorative Arts* reflect recent scholarship on American Modernist design from the years between the World Wars. The idea for the issue arose from a symposium on American Modernist design that I convened at Yale University in October 2004. The speakers at that symposium presented work they had just brought to publication; for this special issue, many of the same authors are represented by new research projects.¹

When I discussed potential topics with these authors, I had some ideas about the common themes that might arise through the juxtaposition of texts. As is inevitable with new research and writing, however, the issues that have come to the fore are not entirely what I expected. This collection provides a picture of American Modernist design that has a level of complexity and variegation that has not been a typical feature of the scholarly record. American design, as presented here, is shaped by a wide range of forces, from multiple European sources to the complexities of the marketplace. Some objects and buildings discussed in the following pages boast quintessential Modernist characteristics, such as simple geometric forms and industrial materials. Others, however, feature surprising combinations of ornamental grammar and expensive materials. As these articles demonstrate, all of these items were considered “modern” at the time by their creators and by consumers, and together they constitute a rich fabric of Modernist production. In addition, the role of the consumer in the development of a design sensibility casts a strong shadow across many of these articles (and comes to the foreground in the final article, by Carma Gorman). When these more multifaceted, consumer-conscious design practices are examined, they lead to a rethinking of the traditional, style-based history of Modernism. Careers and objects that have hitherto been excluded from the American canon are discovered to be vital to the narrative. On a more fundamental level, it is not merely the historical record that has become fuller through this research, but also our very understanding of what constitutes Modernist design.

One of the central pillars in the story of American Modernist design is the influential role of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs

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et Industriels Modernes, held in Paris in 1925. According to conventional wisdom, there was little Modern design in North America before the exposition (indeed, the official reason the United States did not participate was the lack of Modern design production in this country), and after the exposition, French designs were highly influential in this country.² Christopher Long's and Laura McGuire's articles in this issue reveal that the European sources for American design can be found in the early years of the twentieth century and were actually quite complex. Long traces the influence of Viennese *Secessionsstil* on American architecture and design, beginning with the Austrian Pavilion at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis. Through this account, the centrality of Viennese aesthetics in early twentieth-century American design becomes clear; architects and designers working in this country interpreted the Austrian work in a variety of ways, always with an eye to what they believed American consumers would want. McGuire's article focuses on Frederick Kiesler's Film Arts Guild Cinema, built in New York in 1929. The building was a rare example of De Stijl-influenced design in the United States, and was also a venue for Kiesler to explore his radical ideas about interactive art and the possibility of Modernism as a medium for spiritual transcendence.

Not only can multiple European sources be traced in American design: indeed, these articles reveal the complexity of the very definition of Modernist design. Both Marilyn Friedman and I discuss key figures in American design whose products as realized do not easily fit into stylistic categories. Friedman's article traces the history of the influential American Designers' Gallery (ADG), a group of émigré and native-born designers who staged a pair of exhibitions in 1928 and 1929. Although some of the installations from these exhibits are well known in standard design histories, Friedman reveals that the totality of the ADG project was actually multifaceted: early avant-garde designs gave way to a more tempered, in places conservative, aesthetic intended to appeal to a broad public. My article examines the career of Walter W. Kantack, one of the foremost lighting fixture designers of the period. Kantack supplied Modernist fixtures to many high-profile design exhibitions of the 1920s and 1930s, but he also developed a lucrative business in period-revival electric fixtures. His period-styled work is not a sign of his lack of commitment to Modernism, but rather can be read as an alternate Modernism—one that responds to the anxieties of the modern world through creative connections to the past.

As I mentioned previously, the role of the consumer is prominent in all of the research in this issue. Kiesler wanted to bring his ideas about

spiritual art to the masses, and believed that a movie palace—that mecca of mass entertainment—was the best place to do so. A wide variety of designers adopted elements of the *Secessionsstil* idiom, but their interpretations were invariably tempered by what they believed American consumers would buy. When the designers of the ADG decided to focus on affordable, appealing Modern designs, rather than on purely intellectual or aesthetic experiment, they too developed more conservative objects that were intended to match the tastes of a range of American consumers. Finally, the conservative side of Kantack's career can be read as reflecting his shrewd assessment of the marketplace. These designers were all ultimately influenced by what they believed the public would accept and buy; they were not simply preaching taste but reacting to existing conceptions about public sensibilities.

Apart from the producers of design objects, consumers are the crucial other side of the design equation. From a scholarly perspective, “the public,” or “the consumer,” is elusive, difficult to research because, at the broadest level, it is anonymous. Carma Gorman's article offers one method to get at this mysterious other half: through an analysis of Harriet and Vetta Goldstein's *Art in Every Day Life*, the most popular home economics textbook of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, which taught future consumers, according to Gorman, how to evaluate the aesthetics of household products. Her research gives insight into the formation of consumer taste, and reminds us that such taste, when taken en masse to the marketplace, can drive the aesthetic development of designs. Designers did not simply teach aesthetics to the public.

It is my hope that this collection of essays will produce a deeper and more nuanced picture of early American Modernist design than previous publications have done. Further, I hope that it will point to a major future research area, namely the role of consumers in shaping design. How else can we hypothesize about public preferences, beyond studying what consumers read at school, how they were marketed to, and what designers said about them? How can we develop a model of design practice that does not rely on a simple theory of taste such as trickle-down (or permeate-up), but instead encompasses the work of producer and consumer in a dynamic interchange? Our new awareness of the contradictions and complexities in American Modernist design helps prepare us for tackling these questions.

NOTES

1. While none of the research in this special issue has been published before, both Carma Gorman and I have presented aspects of our work at conferences; please see our respective articles for detailed information.
2. U.S. Commission on International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art, Paris, 1925, *Report of Commission Appointed by the Secretary of Commerce to Visit and Report upon the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Art in Paris, 1925* (Washington, D.C., 1926). Two prominent New York exhibitions featured all-French design in the second half of the 1920s: a collection of objects selected from the Paris Exposition, sponsored by the American Association of Museums and shown at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1926; and Lord & Taylor's "Exposition of Modern French Decorative Art," 1928.