

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

LEISURE & ARTS

December 22, 2011

DESIGN

Coming In From the Cold

**Crafting Modernism:
Midcentury American
Art & Design**
Museum of Arts & Design
Through Jan. 15

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The Museum of Arts and Design, formerly the nameless little seraglio at Two Columbus Circle (all right, it's the lollipop building, a name I will forever regret bestowing on it in a review many years ago), the center of a preservationist storm to prevent its conversion into one of the city's most delightful cultural venues, has mounted a show far more ambitious than its intimate scale suggests. "Crafting Modernism: Midcentury American Art and Design" redefines crafts in terms of the social, cultural and artistic revolutions of the mid-20th century.

The handcrafted object as an art form has always occupied an ambiguous place in the fine-arts pantheon, a bit outside and a bit below the "serious" work of painters and sculptors. While the technical and aesthetic skills of those who make these singular objects, often beautiful and sometimes bizarre, has long been recognized as a creative act, their work sat apart in mild discomfort and obvious disconnect in museum displays.

The thesis of this exhibition, which takes up two floors of the museum, is that everything changed between 1945 and 1969. No aspect of art, design or the way we live was unaffected in those turbulent postwar years. Conventional boundaries were blurred as new alliances were formed; painting and sculpture incorporated and exploited crafts materials and techniques in the pursuit of new means of expression. This crossover moment in the arts, according to Jeannine Falino, co-curator of the exhibition with Jennifer Scanlan, marked "the arrival of the crafted object as an aspect of modern art." The role of crafts broadened and deepened, even extending into the provision of models for the commercial production of designs to serve the tastes and needs of a modernist lifestyle.

Despite all this expansion and integration, a certain ambiguity remains, and for me that is still a good thing. What has set handcrafts apart, and always will, is the individual vision and extraordinary skill of those who create a unique, material work that can range from the practical to the abstract. The union of that vision and skill has an emotional charge lacking in impersonal articles of mass production, delivered with an unapologetic emphasis on the delight of the thing itself. That kind of direct, pleasurable response is almost totally lacking in the glow and grunge of the arts today.

This ambiguity is also reflected in the museum's name change from the Museum of Contemporary Crafts to the Museum

of Arts and Design, in an obvious effort to reflect evolving perceptions and practices. But by whatever name it chooses to call itself (it is now known by its acronym, MAD), this small building is an oasis of enchantment, a kind of Camelot on Columbus Circle. Its collections are instant eye candy (if the serious and erudite staff will forgive me), with magic in every imaginable material, leavened by irony and wit. The only uncool move is on the restaurant

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floor, where the building's vertical strip windows, an ingenious way of opening a solid concrete structure for surprisingly focused New York views, were replaced by continuous horizontal windows to provide greater visibility. This misguided change in the architect's original design is not helped by an ersatz '60s decor.

The ambiguity continues with the exhibition's stated theme, "Craft is Art is Craft," an attempt to express the nature of a liaison that remains both evanescent and enigmatic. In "Crafting Modernism," the museum has taken on a subject in which this relationship is extremely complex, involving conflicting strains of art and history. Midcentury modernism combined the urge to redefine crafts as a modern art form while emphasizing their traditional value as complement and counterpoint to modernism's reductionist aesthetic. The exploration and expansion of traditional



'Totem Crying for Lost Memory' (1962) by Robert Sperry.

sioned by the American Crafts Council.

An abstract ceramic piece by the sculptor Peter Voulkos (1958) is particularly powerful. Robert Sperry's stoneware "Totem Crying for Lost Memory" (1962) is an amazing and haunting image. Both transcend the aesthetic and emotional potential of the unusual medium used. Artists also win hands down on furniture of the '50s and '60s designed for mass production. Sculptor Isamu Noguchi's Japanese-inspired paper lamps and his wooden table bases and natural wood tops seem timeless today; so do the simple chairs and beautiful screens by another sculptor, Harry Bertoia. The furniture of leading industrial designers like George Nelson is a cut below this level, though the work successfully embodies all the aspects of "good design" as promoted aggressively by the Museum of Modern Art at the time. Architect-designer Charles Eames embraced new technologies borrowed from the aircraft industry in his plywood and metal chairs, including the lounge chair and ottoman that are coveted icons now. But a sinuous, handcarved music rack by master craftsman Wendell Castle and handmade cradle by Sam Maloof more than hold their own against them all.

The austerity of modernism required warmth and a human touch, and crafts filled the bill. Prestigious corporate headquarters were adorned with dramatic wool wall hangings by Sheila Hicks, and weavings by Dorothy Liebes and Anni Albers appeared in the best new buildings. These artisans turned yarn into strikingly sensuous works of art. Jack Lenor Larsen's fabrics covered modern Knoll furniture with new colors and weaves. Traditional crafts entered modern interiors in the personal folk-art collections of Alexander Girard and Charles and Ray Eames. And although the show covers only American material, Gio Ponti, Franco Albini and other Italian architects who had always practiced across the entire design spectrum were making chairs and lamps that are anonymous classics today, while Scandinavian countries produced furnishings and accessories of unparalleled contemporary elegance.

To this midcentury design and craft revolution, America added its own commentaries on the radical social and political upheavals of the day; antiwar protests, spirituality and symbolism, California funk—all found expression in crafted mementos of those radical movements that seem so remote in the 21st century they did so much to shape. For some, this show will be a walk down memory lane; for others, it is a voyage of discovery. For the museum, it affirms a seriousness of purpose in its programs and establishes its position as a creative contributor to the aesthetic culture of our time.

The hook that pulls you in immediately is the seductive jewelry made by artists; Alexander Calder's spiral silver pin was worn as a badge of elite membership by modernism's early in-crowd. Ibram Lassaw's more intricately constructed necklaces do not quite make it from sculptural to wearable, but are an intriguing hybrid. A gold-and-enamel hair ornament by Margret Craver of such rich and lovely originality that it begs for both use and display (by a great beauty, of course) was commis-

Roomlike settings have been created on the exhibition floors where the work of more than 160 artists, artisans and designers of furniture, textiles, jewelry, glass, ceramics, painting and sculpture are displayed in a carefully selective sampling of a highly popular style. Boomerang shapes? Yes, of course. But those inescapable 1950s clichés are noticeably connected to the curves in avant-garde paintings by artists like Hans Arp and Richard Pousette-Dart, foreshadowing the move from modernism's rectangular rigidities to postmodernism's free forms. There is no kitsch here. For that—and midcentury modernism is overloaded with it—you can go to the trendy stores where it is vastly overpriced.

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