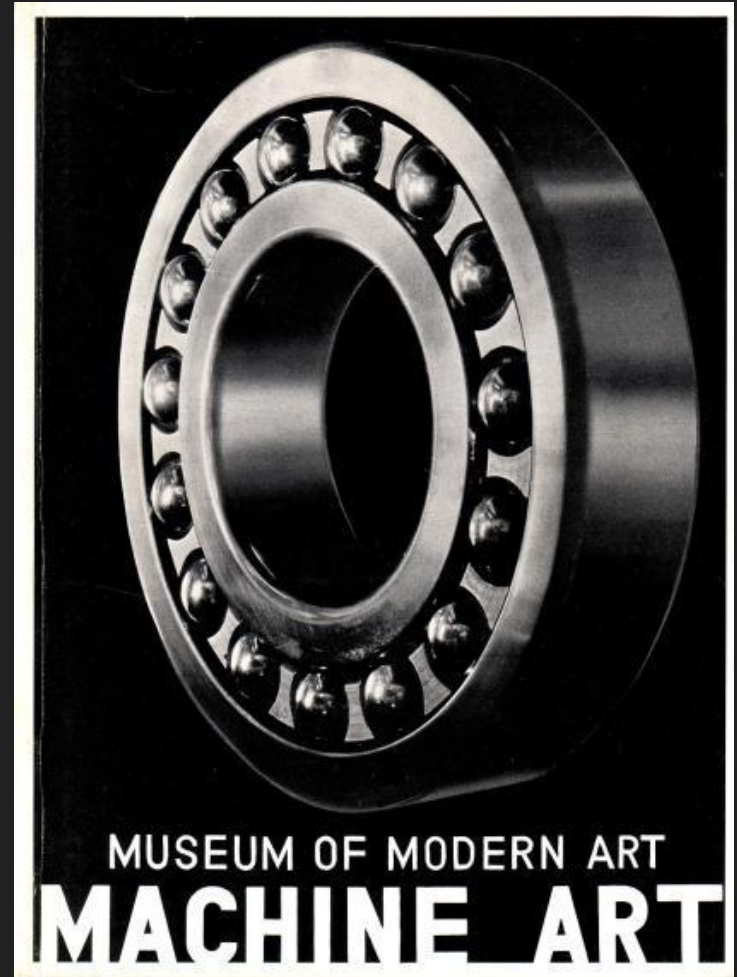


Machine Art Exhibition at MoMA (1934)

Ivory Lee

At a glance...

- Mar 5–Apr 29, 1934
- Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), NY
- Exhibition #34
- Directed by Philip Johnson, Chairman of the Architectural Department of the Museum
- Installations all built by the Museum's own workmen



THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

B6

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Walls are moving, ceilings dropping, lights changing as a day-and-night shift of workmen transforms the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street into a completely new modern background for the Exhibition of Machine Art, which opens Wednesday, March 7. For the first time, the Museum is giving as much importance to the installation as to the Exhibition itself. The background against which the objects will be displayed is not general but specific and has been designed to concentrate maximum attention on each object individually, yet to give a certain coherence to a display of more than a thousand items. In this way the diffusion of interest so confusing in the usual museum display will be avoided. As the installation has been planned from the point of view of the observer, the Museum is keenly interested in the reaction of the public.

The Exhibition

“Visitors to Machine Art were startled to find three floors of utilitarian, machine-made objects, such as springs, pots and pans, and scientific instruments, displayed on pedestals, **elevating them to the level of sculpture**. This reverential display revealed the **considerable aesthetic allure** of these industrial objects, which the Museum capitalized on with a beauty contest judged by celebrities such as Amelia Earhart and the philosopher John Dewey.”



The Exhibition



“Dewey had argued that a person’s experience of things is shaped by the context in which they are viewed, a concept that curator Philip Johnson employed in his groundbreaking design for the exhibition. Johnson took unusual steps to show the objects to their greatest effect: he screened the walls and ceilings of the Museum’s second location in a 19th-century brownstone in order to hide its decorative molding, creating a **sleek, clean atmosphere** that set a new standard for the display of design objects.”

FOREWORD

Machine Art and Geometrical Beauty.

The beauty of machine art is in part the abstract beauty of "straight lines and circles" made into actual tangible "surfaces and solids" by means of tools, "lathes and rulers and squares." In Plato's day the tools were simple handworker's implements but today, as a result of the perfection of modern materials and the precision of modern instruments, the modern machine-made object approaches far more closely and more frequently those pure shapes the contemplation of which Plato calls the first of the "pure pleasures."

Machines are, visually speaking, a practical application of geometry. Forces which act in straight lines are changed in direction and degree by machines which are themselves formed of straight lines and curves. The lever is geometrically a straight line resting on a point. The wheel and axle is composed of concentric circles and radiating straight lines. The watch spring (No. 7) is a spiral. Sphericity and circularity are the geometrical characteristics of a ball bearing (No. 50). Screws, bearing springs (No. 1), and propellers (No. 41) are various—and variously beautiful—applications of the helix and helicoid.

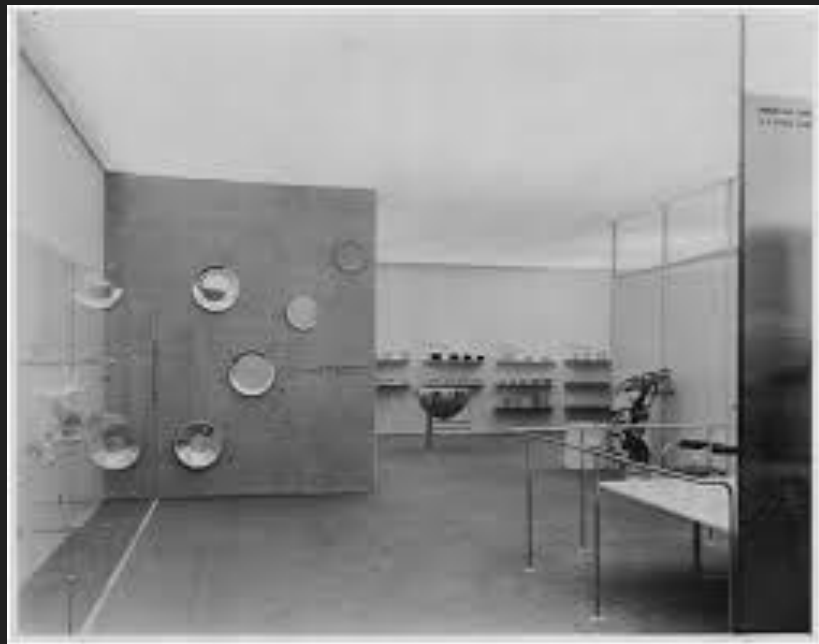


Philip Johnson



- Founding Chairman (1932-34) of the Museum's Department of Architecture, the first department of its kind in a museum of art.
- Johnson, like Barr, believed that industrial objects of **good design merited aesthetic praise and validation**, a conviction stemming from the Bauhaus approach of dealing with various media on an equal aesthetic scale.
- This belief led to the expansion of the scope of the department, which, in 1935, became the Department of Architecture and Industrial Art.

On the eve of the opening of the Museum in 1929, Barr wrote that “the Museum would probably expand beyond the **narrow limits** of painting and sculpture in order to include departments devoted to drawings, prints, and photography, typography, the arts of commerce and industry, architecture...stage designing, furniture, and the decorative arts.”



It wasn't just the objects themselves or the forward-thinking exhibition design that made Machine Art so monumental in the history of product design, Johnson actually included the names of the designers as well as the manufacturer and the price in the exhibition's listings. It wasn't an easy task; Johnson later noted that "we tried to find objects that were designed by names, and there hardly were any names."

Designers were no longer cogs in the manufacturing process, but artists with real-world impact who **deserved to be named**. Ultimately, the exhibition served as an advertisement for a new kind of art emerging from America's economy—now known as design.