The Twenties Created the Classics of Today: ARCHITECTURE VIEW ...
Huxtable, Ada Louise
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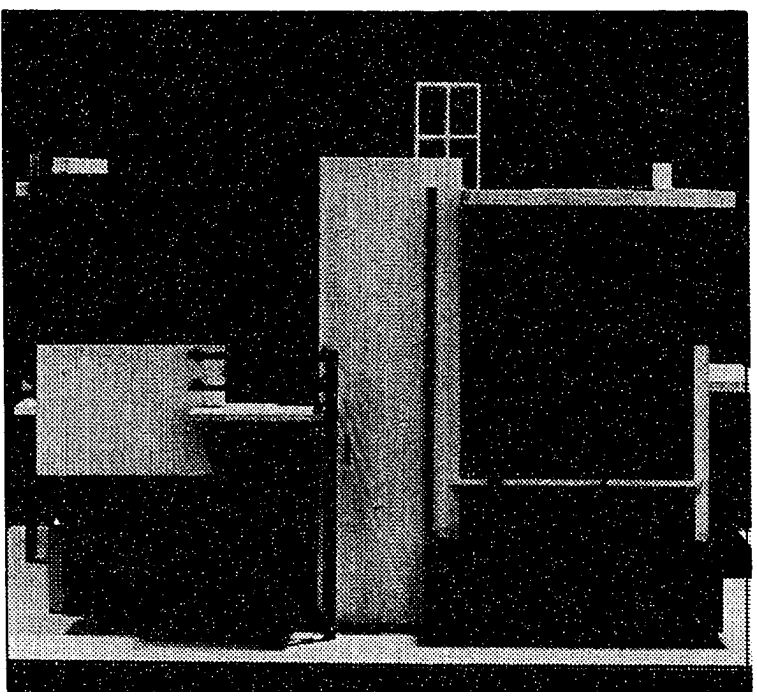
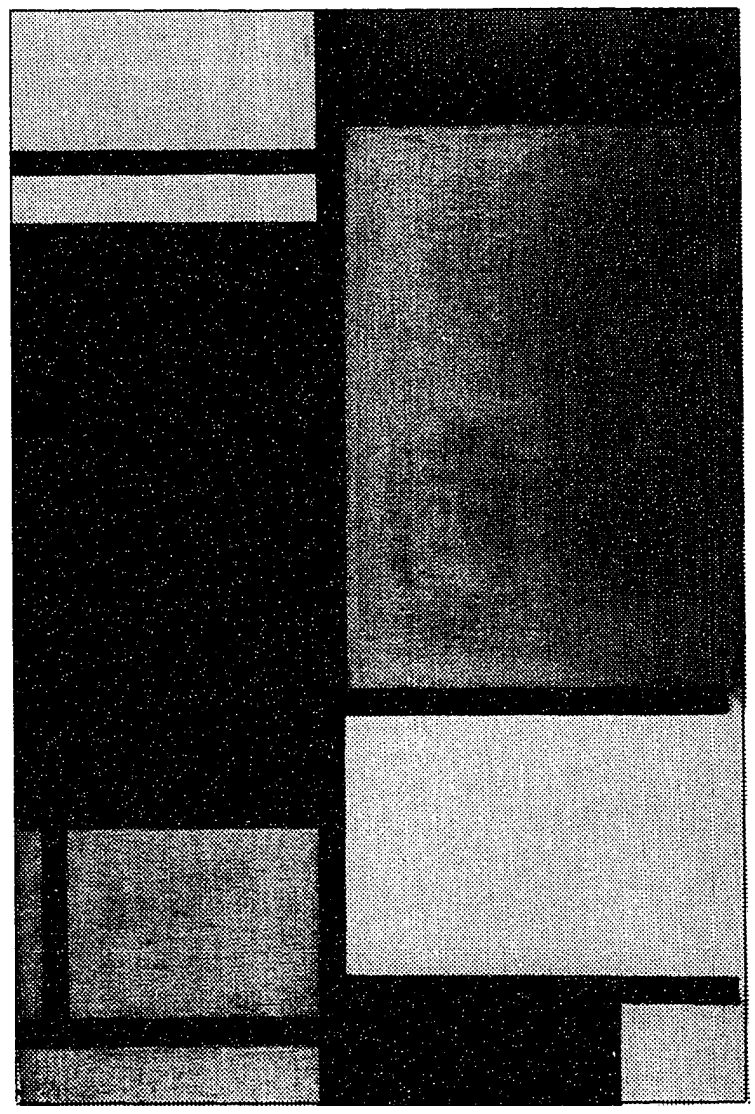
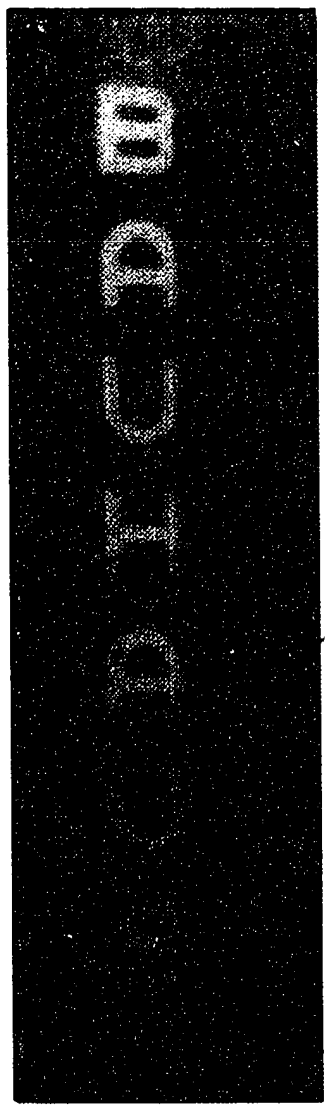
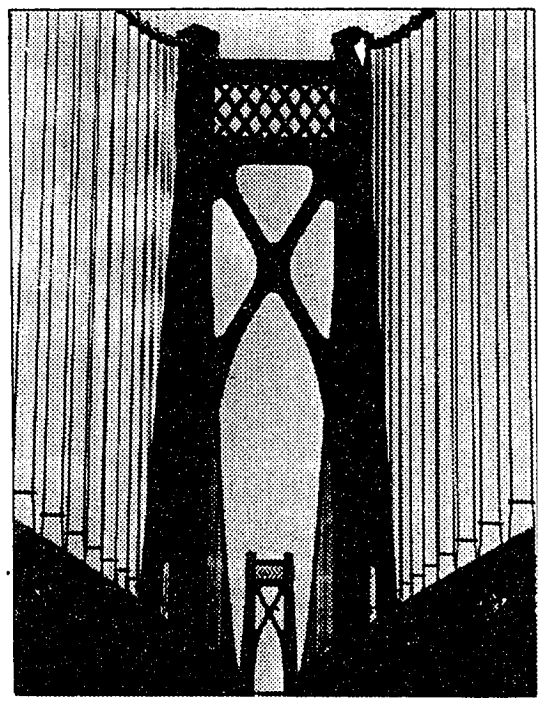
The Twenties Created the Classics of Today



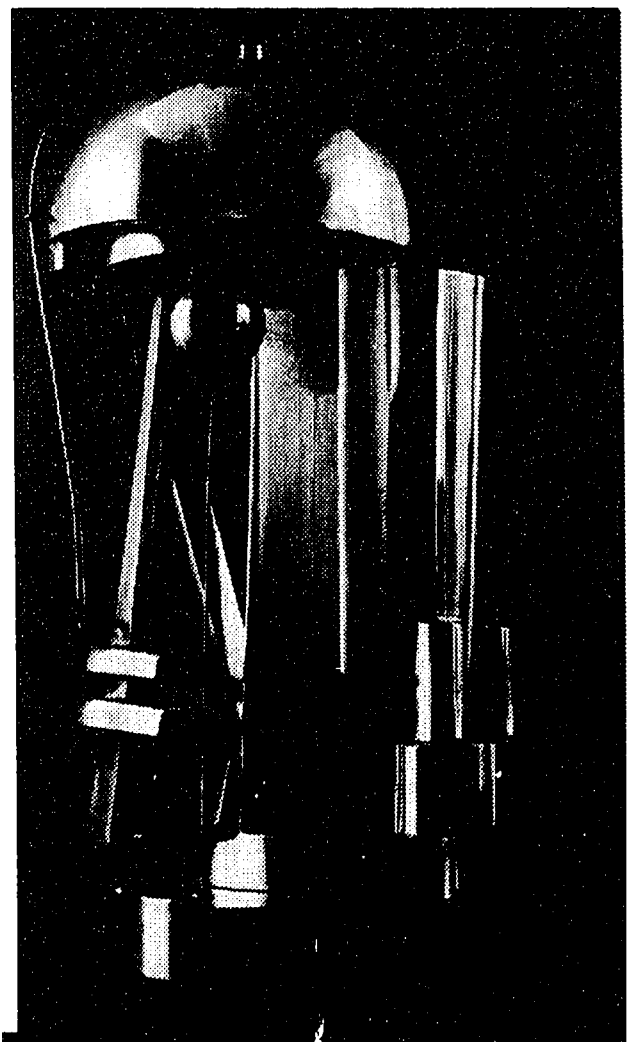




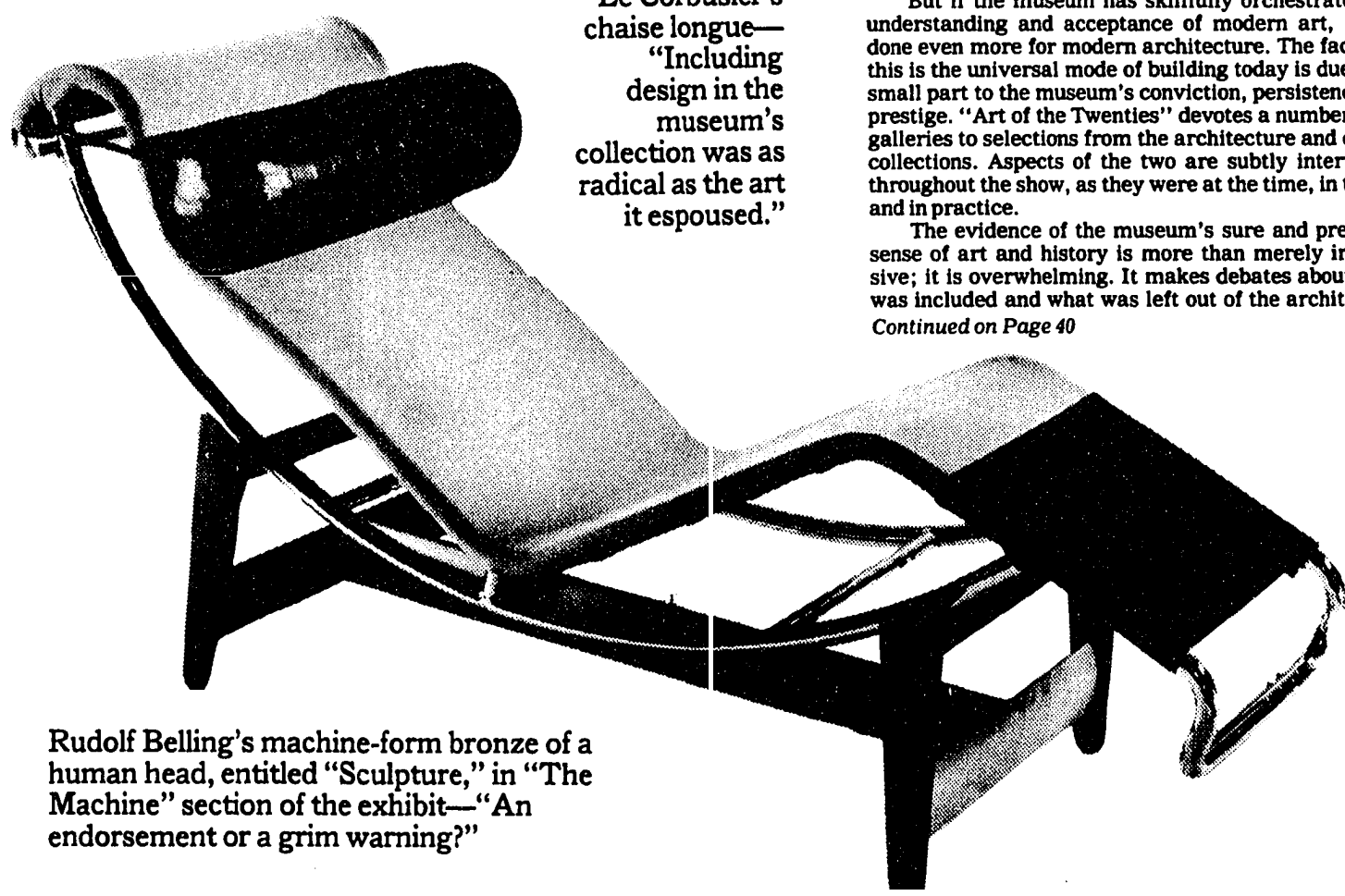
Model of the Schroeder House (above) designed by Gerritt Rietveld; and Piet Mondrian's "Composition" (right), in the "Art of the Twenties" exhibition now at the Museum of Modern Art



Ralph Steiner's "Bridge" (left) pictures the Brooklyn Bridge, a leitmotif of the Modern's exhibit. Below, a detail from Georg Scholz's "Daily Paper."



Le Corbusier's chaise longue—"Including design in the museum's collection was as radical as the art it espoused."



Rudolf Belling's machine-form bronze of a human head, entitled "Sculpture," in "The Machine" section of the exhibit—"An endorsement or a grim warning?"

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

. . .And Celebrates Its Landmarks

The Museum of Modern Art's "Art of the Twenties" show is a splendid antidote to kitsch. It leads from strength, rather than from nostalgia. What comes through everything on display is the exceptional quality of the museum's holdings of the period, and the remarkable role the museum itself played in shaping and recording the modernist revolution.

But if the museum has skillfully orchestrated the understanding and acceptance of modern art, it has done even more for modern architecture. The fact that this is the universal mode of building today is due in no small part to the museum's conviction, persistence and prestige. "Art of the Twenties" devotes a number of its galleries to selections from the architecture and design collections. Aspects of the two are subtly interwoven throughout the show, as they were at the time, in theory and in practice.

The evidence of the museum's sure and prescient sense of art and history is more than merely impressive; it is overwhelming. It makes debates about what was included and what was left out of the architecture

Continued on Page 40

ARCHITECTURE VIEW

The Twenties and Its Landmarks

Continued from Page 1

life. If the museum has been filling in a few gaps with the help of hindsight, that is a permissible luxury. The selection on view is not only a stunning summary of the unparalleled collections that document a unique chapter in art history, it is also the record of a dazzlingly creative decade.

Architecturally, these are the bombshells that blew apart centuries of the classical tradition: Le Corbusier's Savoy House, Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, the Bauhaus, Constructivism, De Stijl. The models, photographs, drawings and objects in these galleries are not dated curiosities; they are the classics of modern art, the work that quite literally changed the world. None of it has lost meaning; that meeaning has simply been expanded with the passage of time. These buildings are not frozen in the 20's; they continue to influence much so-called post-modernist design. Interpreted in new ways and appearing in new transformations, they only gain in stature as time passes, even as architecture moves beyond them.

The idea of a total 20th-century esthetic was the basis of Alfred H. Barr Jr.'s concept of modernism as it evolved in the 20's, and it did much to determine the nature of the museum. A close-knit relationship of all the arts is at the heart of modernism, as it has been for every great style. The difference is that the synthesis was perceived at the time, and the line was deliberately blurred between objects of high art and everyday life. The decision to include architecture and design at the museum's inception, in its departments as well as its collections, was as radical as the art it espoused.

Many of the themes of art and architecture in the 1920's were the same: expressionism, abstraction, the espousal of the machine and the rejection of the past, commonly tied to a universal social message. There was the curious and wonderful anachronism of an elite esthetic democracy: an artful formula for human betterment expressed in a "pure" vocabulary meant to create a well-designed industrial Utopia for all. The wrongs of the past were to be shed with its forms and decoration.

This revolutionary art of the 20's was the substance of the museum's epochal exhibitions of the 30's. In 1932, "Architecture: The International Style" brought the new building to the American public and the style was codified in the book by Hitchcock and Johnson. "Machine Art," in 1934, championed the radical idea of an industrial esthetic. These shows were eye-openers and consciousness-raisers. They contributed substantially to the ongoing redefinition of the arts, and of architecture and design in particular. The museum could confidently make the statement, on its 15th anniversary in 1944, that it had "deliberately set out to challenge, change and redirect the very character and ideals of American architecture."

In essence, it succeeded in doing so, if not always in quite the way that was intended. No matter; one of the most remarkable and far-reaching marriages of art and pragmatism was made in the museum. All that was lost in the process were the motivating social ideals.

At the beginning, those ideals were as prominently displayed as the art. Housing was a frequent subject of the museum's early exhibitions, as it was in numerous avant-garde expositions abroad; the pitch was in terms of both need and design. "The new spirit" was meant to cover everything from the way one saw to the way one lived. But underneath the excitement and evangelism, there was one constant that survived the changes in hopes and expectations: a powerful, enduring esthetic.

That esthetic is what this show is all about. The faith, the propaganda, the ingenuous belief in the curative qualities of art, are gone. The role of pioneer, of polemicist, is past. What remains at the museum, quite simply, is the outstanding collection of the modernist period.

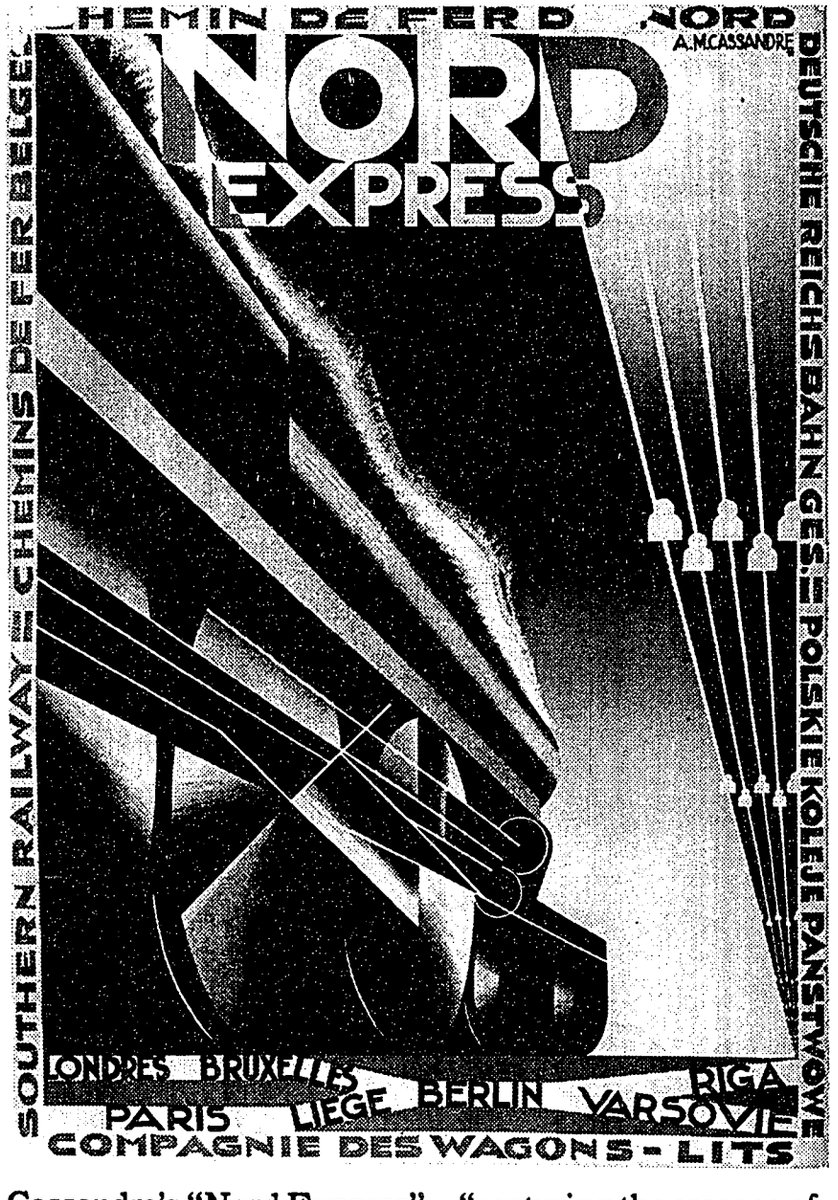
The Mies van der Rohe archive alone is one of the greatest holdings of architectural material anywhere. The Savoy House model is from the 1932 exhibition, and is the only original record of Le Corbusier's surprising color intentions. A rich collection of De Stijl ranges from a model of the Schroeder House by Gerritt Rietveld to Theo van Doesburg's color constructions for architectural projects and the red and blue Rietveld chair that has become a kind of icon for several generations of architecture students. The same meticulous Dutch geometry informs everything from paintings by Mondrian to housing by J.J.P. Oud.

Drawings for wall hangings by Anni Albers are natural partners for chrome-steel Bauhaus chairs. The Bauhaus itself, which opened the decade at Weimar in 1919, was a fountainhead for art and design of all sorts. Walter Gropius's landmark building for the school, when it moved to Dessau, was completed in 1925. The constructions and photographs of Moholy-Nagy have lost none of their power to intrigue and delight. The paintings and costumes of Oskar Schlemmer conjure up a special Bauhaus world. Teapots and tables are at once bravely dated in their handcrafted "machine art" style and eternally handsome. Stripped and stylish graphics fathered a commercial revolution. The extent of the Bauhaus "fallout" can never be calculated.

Since modernism came more slowly to the United States, the American work in the show is necessarily more limited. Some has been underestimated. A beautifully made, elaborate model of Richard Neutra's Lovell House designed in 1929 in Los Angeles (photographs of the building under construction were in the 1932 exhibit) is an outstanding California example of the International Style. There are photographs of Hood and Howells's Daily News Building of 1930 in New York.

Only the posters deal in conspicuous nostalgia. Cassandre caught the essence of a 1920's world of luxurious French trains and liqueurs; E. McKnight Kauffer celebrated the London Underground. It seemed to be a time of continuous film festivals and those elaborate costume parties beloved by the avant-garde, with superb graphics run up for every occasion.

It is impossible here to credit all of those who built the museum's collections, but there is a fine set of publications issued over the years (another field in which the museum led the way) that documents exhibitions and acquisitions and the people responsible for them. For the "Art of the Twenties," the director of the department of architecture and design, Arthur Drexler, and the curator of design, J. Stewart Johnson, have selected the material, working with the director of the exhibition, William S. Lieberman. If they have been able to do no more than scratch the surface of the 20's and the museum's resources, they have done so with knowledge, affection, a marvelous eye and the perspective that only half a century can give. ■



Cassandre's "Nord Express"—"capturing the essence of the 1920's world of luxurious French trains"