MOMA's immortal pots and pans
By Ada Louise Huxtable
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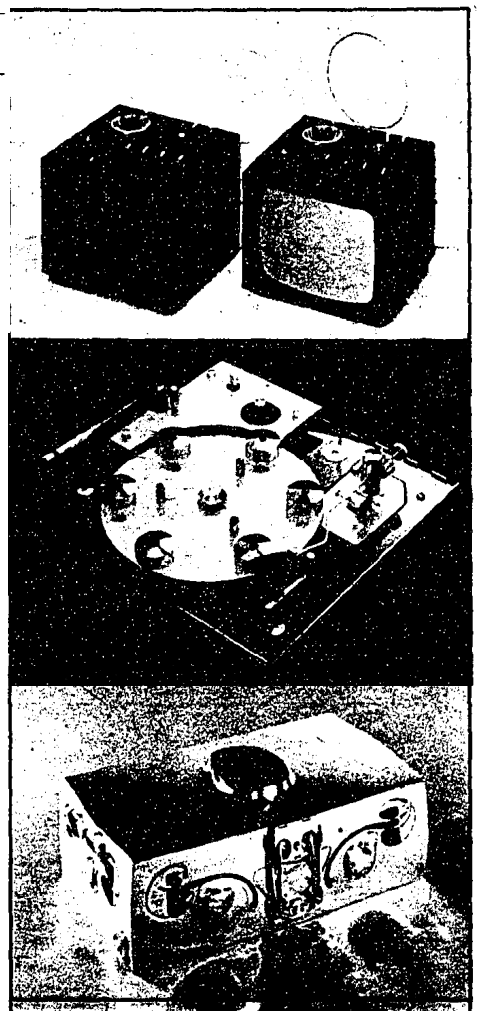
Below. Nickel-silver and ebony teapot 8½ inches high, designed by Marianne Brandt, produced in Germany's Bauhaus Metal Workshop in 1924. Like the other objects on these pages, it is from the Museum of Modern Art's Design Collection.



Top. TV set (1970); Marco Zanuso and Richard Sapper, designers; built by Brionvega S.P.A., Italy. Screen is not illuminated in model at left.

Middle. Phonograph turntable in aluminum and acrylic (1964). Designed by David Gammon; manufactured by Transcriptors, Ltd., London.

Above. Jewelry box (c. 1900) of silver, mother-of pearl, turquoise, enamel. Designer, Archibald Knox; made by Liberty & Co., England.

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By Ada Louise Huxtable

This year a pocket calculator became approximately the 2,100th object in the Museum of Modern Art's Design Collection, a collection consisting of objects both hand-made and machine-made that range from household furnishings and office equipment to tableware, tools and textiles. The Design Collection is now a nonstop, 42-year phenomenon, and the pots and pans, beaters and bowls, tables and chairs, typewriters and calculators on which MOMA grace falls keep discreetly piling up. They have just been beautifully and expensively installed in impressive new study quarters in a continuing program of acquisition and classification under the direction of the Department of Architecture and Design.

The museum likes to refer to its collection as a "pantheon" of the best of the world's products, and a pantheon, according to the dictionary, is a temple or galaxy of the gods. For the past 45 years, MOMA has been both temple and godhead for the arts of our time. Recently, along with other institutions, it has suffered upheavals of value that have made its omniscience and immortality suspect where once it reigned culturally supreme. The quality of its collections is unmatched, but its role definition has become somewhat wobbly. Maker of history, it is a victim of history as well.

The Design Collection, however, seems to have suffered fewer of the tremors of change than almost any other of the museum's activities. The selection of an article for inclusion in it is a canonization of sorts, a distinct (and often commercially useful) cachet that has been conferred on items from Tiffany glass to a Chemex coffee maker. According to the museum, the two criteria that always apply are "quality" and "historical significance."

"An object," says Arthur Drexler, director of the department, "is chosen for its quality because it is thought to achieve, or to have originated, those formal ideals of beauty which have become the major stylistic concepts of our time. Historical significance is a more flexible evaluation. It applies to objects not necessarily works of art but which, nevertheless, have contributed importantly to the development of design."

Those statements are loaded. What is meant is that the toaster with a Museum of Modern Art selection tag may not work, but as it burns the toast, it is making a polemical point. (If the manufacturer has cut engineering corners in production, that is not the museum's fault or responsibility. But one also suspects that it is not its first concern.) The teakettle that does not pour may very well embody a valid, formal ideal of beauty. A chair may be a major stylistic concept or an important step forward in design development even if it tips over repeatedly.

The museum has admittedly been hoist by its own polemics from time to time, in such things as the promotion of the handle design by William Lamb, an essay in "biomorphic" form modeled from the human hand and meant to be applied to everything liftable. It turns out that a smooth, simple, universal shape works better than bumps. But at that time "biomorphic" or "organic" form was "in."

And there were other occasions when objects strained uncomfortably at the frontiers of technology because that, too, was "in." They made up in philosophical justification whatever they lacked in *gemütlichkeit. Gemütlichkeit,* or sheer comfort and likableness, has never been big in the design collection. It has been necessary to enjoy a certain evangelical austerity to live in a total MOMA environment. One is referred to as a "purist."

The selection process has, in fact, been polemical all the way. The museum has instructed and exhorted us about "good design" and "useful objects" with a small town preacher's conviction about sin. Good Design has capital letters in MOMA's lexicon, and bad design was a capital offense. The message and morel were projected in shows and in print from 1937 to 1940 by John McAndrew, curator of the then Department of Architecture and Industrial Art, in a series of pleasantly didactic "Useful Objects" events.

The policy was continued and enlarged from 1940 to 1945 by Eliot Noyes, as director of a separate Department of Industrial Design. From 1950 to 1955, Edgar Kaufmann Jr. directed the "Good Design" exhibitions, often with a modest price tag set as the limit to prove that good taste, like democracy and virtue, was an option for all. Competitions were held with the avowed intent of influencing manufacturers; selections were aimed at store buyers; and enlightenment was meant for everyone.

But even as the museum set its course of consumer education (now good naturedly elitist it seems today), it was doing something far more important. It was charting the contemporary history of the art of design, courageously and nontraditionally, as it enlarged the definition from conventional decorative arts to man-made objects of every kind. It extended the category and the concept into the realities of the 20th century, including the whole range of utilitarian and decorative articles that result from mass manufacture—as well as from crafts—for needs and tastes peculiar and essential to our time.

Looked at that way, the collection is an impeccable compendium of esthetic criteria and cultural insights. It is valid and valuable art scholarship. It broke ground within the same framework of revelations and definitions that made MOMA, led by the unique vision of Alfred Barr's superb scholarship, the unassailable institution that it still is, in terms of art history and of the quality of its acquisitions. This is the design collection's real significance, rather than its self-proclaimed propagandistic merits.

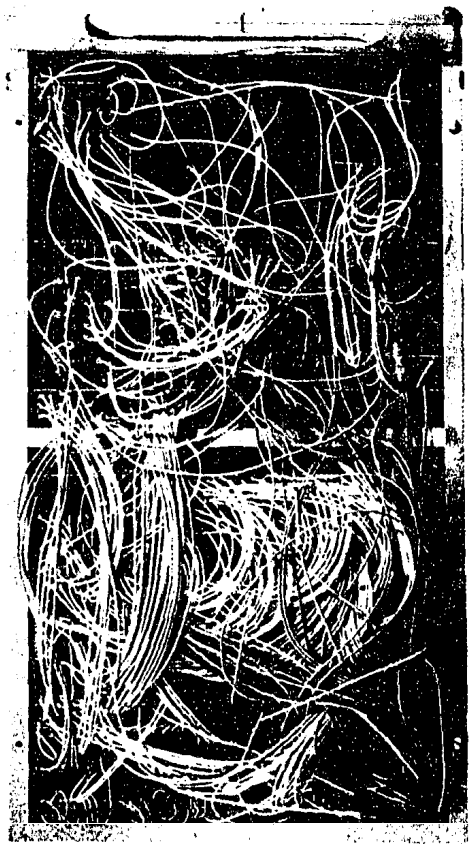
This does not mean that the design collection is not highly, even arbitrarily, selective or without a somewhat parochial point of view The museum has endorsed certain movements (Art Nouveau and De Stijl) and rejected others (Art Deco and Style Moderne). It has been a rigid adherent of the Bauhaus and the International Style. Such decisions were always consistent with the "revolutionary" philosophy of modern art out of which the institution was born, based on highly moralistic tenets of "functional" and "technological" verities, rather than a "new look."

In spite of disclaimers, however, the so-called verities and the new look were inseparable. There was a good deal of mutual intellectual and visual seduction. It began with Philip Johnson's "Machine Art" show in 1934, which burst upon public consciousness with the revelation that ball bearings and propellors were to be considered forms of sculptural, abstract beauty. (They were and are.) Design excellence was therefore defined as both functional and rational, found either ready-made in objects of the machine process, or capable of bestowal on objects of daily use by the machine process.

That was the *(Continued on Page 76)*

Below. Molded plywood chair with metal-rod base (1946). Charles Eames, designer; manufactured by Herman Miller, United States.

Eames-Saarinen design for a plywood chair with foam-rubber upholstery.



Control pattern of Random Access Memory Accounting Machine—IBM 305 (1950). Aluminum frame, wires covered with colored plastic. Built by IBM Corp., United States.

Design /continued from page 75

rationale. It was a time of theory and proselytization. The lesson taught by the Bauhaus in Germany in the nineteen-twenties, a set of righteous esthetic strictures on how to design for mass production, set the theme. The fact that the Bauhaus objects were handcrafted for that machine look compounded self-delusion; but in retrospect, this is part of their earnest charm and style.

The Bauhaus doctrine remained dominant in the museum's presentations for the next two decades. Everything was to be replicable and teachable (you, too, can design well and appreciate good design). The museum continued to tell the public why things were going to look different, and why they should like them that way. Every effort was bent to promoting the basic tenets of the faith. It was sheer altruistic hard sell.

At the beginning, there was hopeful lip service to the new American profession of industrial design, but that was dashed as products became the manipulated captives of advertising and marketing techniques. It is not a secret that American design representation, with the exception of the work of a star practitioner like Charles Eames, is a problem, and that the leadership palm has been handed to the Germans and Italians, in that chronological order. Only in the design world of high technology, such as computer components, does the American genius reign supreme.

In the forties there appeared a kind of split: "organic" vs. "functional" design. Definitions were fuzzy, but the free-form shapes of the architect Alvar Aalto and the painter Joan Miró became repeated clichés, transferred from art to objects. (Remember the free-form coffee table?)

In the fifties everyone still believed firmly in the gospel of new materials and techniques. Eames chairs and tables joined the collection in increasing numbers (there are more than 50), as cumulative evidence of "modernism," as a style of lightness, mobility and technological skill. Eames may be the major design figure of the century; museum recognition spurred his international imitators. The collection grew by leaps and bounds, carefully nurtured for many years by the late Greta Daniel, the department's dedicated and able Curator of Design.

Maybe it was all too much; the sixties brought the reaction. But the sixties also brought a reaction against accepted doctrine everywhere; it was the period of the antihero, antiart and antidesign. It was also a period, suddenly, of explosively brilliant work by the Italians. Finally freed of the Bauhaus shackles, Italian imagination apparently had no limits.

Recognizing esthetic pluralism, the museum departed from its narrow line. A retrospective Italian design show held in 1972 presented, in addition to some excruciatingly elegant objects, protest nonexhibits and social debate about the role of design. (The Italians are as spectacular polemicists as artists.)

Even more than the Italian work, however, the object in the collection most expressive of the era is probably a Danish urethane-foam armchair by Gunnar Andersen, which resembles nothing so much as a repulsive mud pie. If this is a formal ideal of beauty, it is an appropriately perverse one for a perverse age and a curious change of pace after almost half a century of insistence on logic, fitness and finesse.

Which leads naturally to the questions: Where does the museum go from here? After the antidesign decade, what? The seventies appear to be a time of nervous exhaustion; no one is quite sure what comes next.

Design theoreticians are still in business debating the polarities (not as far apart as supposed) of the Pop scene and a cool, Corbusian revival —all very stratospheric. The junk scene of a disposable society continues unabated, in spite of environmental alarms. The museum buys cautiously. It covets the artifacts of the past and would like to fill in gaps in its 19th- and early-20th-century possessions, with the work of such pioneers as Macintosh and Gaudí. There is a certain public ennui toward the more *soigné* virtues of plastic.

History has caught up with the avant-garde. And the collection has taken its place in history. ■