ARCHITECTURE VIEW: DECORATIVE OBJECTS WITH SPECIAL MAGIC ARCHITECTURE VIEW DECORATIV

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Decorative Objects With Special Magic

Whatever philosophical and educational revolutions museums periodically go through, they are basically treasure houses, and the one constant response on visiting them is an overwhelming, pleasurable, visceral sense of beauty. That reaction can be enhanced measureably, of course, by what museums choose to teach us in a variety of ways, from information to installation, as an aid to our understanding of the creative act. But understanding takes work, and museums have been oversold as fun. They are serious and sublime places, and their treasures rarely yield up their full measure of meaning or delight without a considerable historical and esthetic investment. There is no free lunch in life or art.

The most accessible of all these esthetic experiences, and the one that yields its pleasures most directly and immediately, is decorative arts. Except for scholars and specialists, however, the decorative arts have existed in a sort of unfashionable limbo for much of this century. The intellectual elite (yes, there is an elite even in a populist age, which give elitism a nice, reverse twist) has embraced the naked, functional simplicity and machine esthetic of modernism. The proper stance, until very recently, was to reject ornament and decoration of all kinds.

This wasn't always so, of course; the pioneers of the modern movement, from the 19th-century English Arts and Crafts to the early 20th-century Wiener Werkstätte, wanted to clean things up, but not to outlaw all decorative design. Architects and designers like William Morris, Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Otto Wagner, who were consciously changing the rules, used traditional crafts and techniques to do so. The message was new, but the means were old. And the satisfactions of the eye and hand were as old as time.

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These satisfactions are currently being offered in two decorative arts exhibitions that opened quietly in New York museums in August. These displays are as close to instant esthetic gratification as it is possible to get. Although the sheer visual impact of some of these objects is extraordinary, it is even more interesting to note how many represent a virtual revival of out-of-favor early modern styles.

"Recent Acquisitions: Architecture and Design," directed J. Stewart Johnson, curator of design at the Musem of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street), will only be on view through Sept. 30. The show consists of 25 objects and 12 posters and architectural drawings culled from 250 items collected by the Department of Architecture and Design in the past three years. All have been chosen with the museum's familiar, avowed purpose of "tracing the development of modern design from its beginnings to the present day." But there is a difference between the austere design sermon we used to get at the Modern and this kind of lush spendor. Another difference is that the galleries are crowded. Traditional decorative art shows have been sparsely attended by collectors or connoisseurs, or a few people who have clearly lost their way.

The second show, at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street), the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Design, is simply called "The Cooper-Hewitt Collections: Glass." Installed in the former library of the Carnegie Mansion, where discreet cases have replaced bookshelves, it will be visible somewhat longer than the show at the Modern — until Nov. 25.

Ah, how the Cooper-Hewitt has been teasing us! Its "theme" and "showcase" exhibitions since it opened have included a titillating sampling from its collections, while a few of its outstanding possessions have been quietly inserted into shows from outside sources. Only in the past year, starting with a small, select display of ceramics and continuing now with this show of glass — 125 examples chosen from the enormous variety owned by the museum — does the Cooper-Hewitt seriously suggest that these objects are to be looked at purely for themselves, without the associative values imposed by the display, in terms of material, technique, style and notable esthetic achievement. At bottom, that is what a design collection is all about. No tricks, just the very best and the most beautiful things that the history of art and crafts can produce.

That the Cooper-Hewitt does this with an injection of the off-beat serves to liven things up considerably. The museum may not produce the definitive study on a subject, but it consistently shows the timely and the unexpected, readjusting one's vision and definition of the beautiful and the useful. And there is always an unending supply of wonderful objects to look at and enjoy in the most directly sensuous way.

In contrast to the Cooper-Hewitt, the Modern has been in the business of readjusting vision and definitions in a more coolly polemical fashion for the past 50 years. Its Design Collection is a scholarly, interpretive record of the break with tradition in the 19th century that evolved into the styles of the 20th century. Right now the museum is "filling the gaps" in its collections by acquiring some magnificent objects of more traditional skills and more frankly sensuous leanings.

If you will pardon my ideological backsliding, it is these

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A Lalique bowl in the exhibit at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum

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acquisitions that particularly enchant me, rather than the molded polyurethane marvels of "anti-design" that are so prominent a part of the record of recent years. The Modern's recently acquired tureen, ladle and pitcher in silver, ebony and crystal, by the 19th-century English designer Christopher Dresser, have an arresting and aristocratic presence. A Mackintosh table from Hill House insists on a profile of pure perfection. A 1919 sideboard by the Dutch architect Gerritt Rietveld (destroyed and reproduced from his drawings) is the incredible De Stijl embodiment of a Mondrian jazz abstraction. An Art Nouveau parasol handle of gold and ivory by Hector Guimard is pure belle-epoque indulgence. All engage the senses totally. And all overshadow the later paper and plastic games.

At the Cooper-Hewitt, the range is from ancient Roman to 20th-century Viennese. The current revivals are emphasized with a lushness of Lalique and an iridescence of Tiffany, and there are teasers from complete collections of many periods and styles. Tour-de-force pieces of overwhelming technical magnificence are common.

What all of these objects in both shows have in common is the superb use of techniques of design and decoration to manipulate form or create ornament so intrinsic to the material and so expressive of its properties that the result is an object of very special esthetic quality.

At the Cooper-Hewitt there is a Waterford decanter with surface cutting so miraculously attuned to its shape and size that it holds and refracts lights in a manner that makes it seem illuminated from within. The Modern's large favrile glass shade from Louis Tiffany's own dining room is a verdantly luminous pattern in a geometric, leaded framework that has affinities with Pier Luigi Nervi's gracefully engineered, flowerlike domes. There is a piece of Lalique glass at the Cooper-Hewitt with deep-etched, overlapping transparent layers of an ethereal complexity of planes that architects are only beginning to understand and utilize as a principle of design. The thin glass-bubble bonbonnieres by Lobmeyr at the Cooper-Hewitt and the delicate, iridescent cordials by Wagner at the Modern make no apologies for their extravagant, almost frightening fragility.

Each piece on display has a special kind of magic. All represent the sheer, unrepentent luxury of art and technique in the service of pleasure, achieved through the greatest technical discipline. Not least, beauty is back in style. ■