ARCHITECTURE VIEW: 'EXQUISITE THINGS MADE BY MAN'
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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

'Exquisite Things Made by Man'

It is almost impossible to grasp or communicate the richness and variety at the exhibition that has just opened at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, 2 East 91st Street (through Feb. 12), called "More Than Meets the Eye." Subtitled "An Exhibition of Objects from the Permanent Collections," this is the long-awaited, selective unveiling of the Cooper—Hewitt's holdings in the decorative arts that were the cause of so much institutional infighting a few years ago when the museum was struggling to survive.

Last year, when the museum reopened in the restored Carnegie Mansion as the Smithsonian's National Museum of Design, it was enough to celebrate a happy ending and a new home. (On these early winter evenings it is worth lingering to see jewel-bright glass and green-bronze marquee above the mansion's entrance lighted against the Maxfield Parrish sky of Central Park at dusk.) But the collection remained under wraps. This year, it is the collection that is being celebrated. "More Than Meets the Eye" is, finally, the museum's real opening gun.

Even so, the exhibition is still the tip of an iceberg. There are nearly 400 items on display, representing some of the most exquisite or unusual things ever made by man, and this is just a sampling of several hundred thousand items in the collection. Paintings, drawings, prints and decorative objects of every description—textiles, wallpapers, ceramics, glass, wood and metalwork, jewelry, furniture and toys—are shown against a surprising peach-colored background and russett and green velvets in the handsomely proportioned, oak-trimmed rooms. The effect is warm and brilliant.

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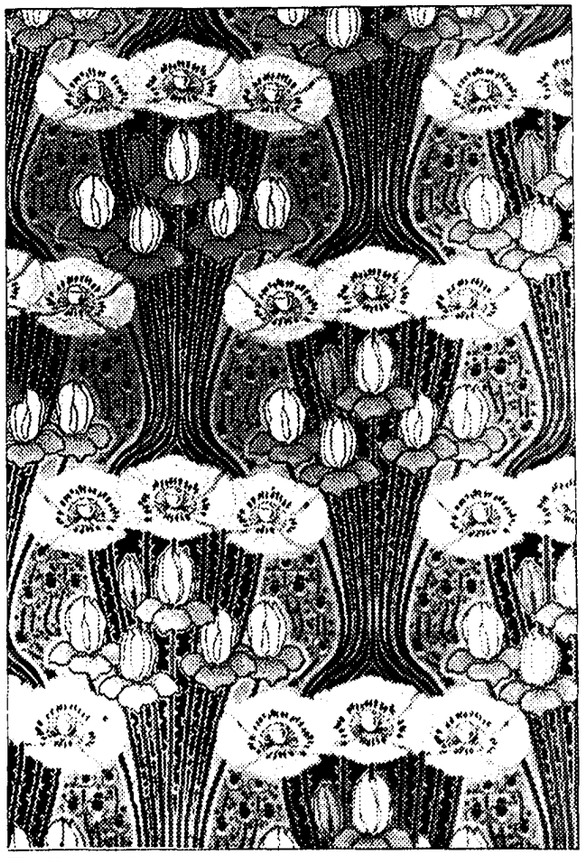
In fact, it is quite possible to enjoy these things exclusively for their forms, textures and techniques without too much thought about how art and utility combine for high style, status and taste. But the Cooper-Hewitt staff has provided an extra dimension by organizing the material not as "masterpieces," or "periods," but in a series of juxtapositions that illuminate concepts, sources and relationships in a way that enlists elements of surprise, discovery and wit. There is, indeed, more than meets the eye.

The exhibition has been organized by Elaine Evans Dee, Dorothy Twining Globus, Gillian Moss, Christian Rohlfing and Milton Sonday of the museum staff, with installation by Cleo Nichols. Special animation is credited to Edwin Schlossberg, in what will surely be the popular hit of the exhibition and the holiday season, the toys and amusements section which reaches a climax of evocative wonder in a 17th-century Venetian puppet show with commedia dell'arte figures that bring baroque art and Venice to life. Restoration of many of the items has been aided by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts.

The exhibition is divided into four categories: Design Sources, Patrons and Clients, Construction and Techniques, and Amusements. Sources include nature, literary themes, historical events and revival styles. Patrons and Clients concentrates on the sponsorship of church, state, and commercial and private commissions. Construction and Techniques offers embellishments through painting, printing, carving, embossing, etc. Amusements include the games and toys of a pre-television age.

These divisions are more revealing than arbitrary; they succeed in suggesting endless responses to the processes and products of design. The juxtapositions demonstrate the invention, adaptation and copying that takes place as styles and motifs are cycled and recycled through history's changing eye. The staff has clearly had a wonderful time putting together such things as a 16th-century Spanish, Gothic-patterned silk fabric with a 19th-century Gothic revival wallpaper replete with fuchsia roses, or hanging textiles celebrating events like Lord Nelson's funeral or Lindberg's flight. The impact of intricate wrought-iron from the stables at Chantilly is greater for being displayed with a delicate modern weaving, and the theme of Judith and Holofernes appears as an embroidery, a lace and a print, from as many different periods.



Roller-printed cotton in "More Than Meets the Eye" at Cooper-Hewitt

One's perception is challenged and stretched by these visual essays. The Rococo section, for example, unites 18th-century French candelabra by Claude Bellin the Younger with early 20th-century Art Nouveau objects by Hector Guimard. A French marquetry and ormolu chest suggests a direct line to a Belter sofa and chair a century later. This technique sacrifices contextual "correctness" to stimulate comparative observations—an exercise that reveals a great deal about art, taste and change in the larger context of time and culture. It works well; there is freshness and surprise everywhere, while information is skillfully disseminated. For those who wish to pursue a more orderly scholarship, there are the study collections upstairs.

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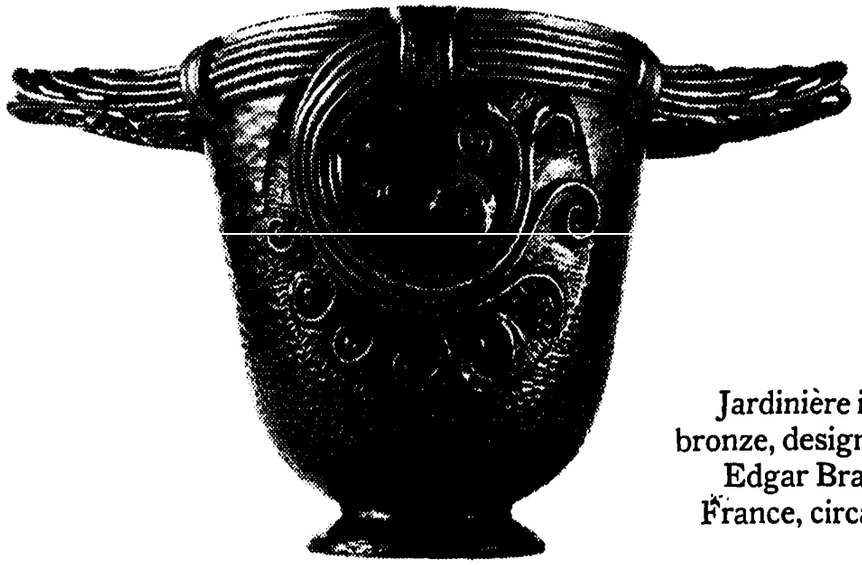
To list favorites or high spots would be an endless task, and there are many treasures for the cognoscenti. But don't miss the delicate ink and sky-blue wash drawings of lion-head, bird and mask designs for metalwork or enamels by Hans Holbein the Younger; the set of 12 painted buttons from the frock coat of Toussaint L'overture of c. 1796, one and a half-inch diameter miniatures by Augustus Brunais that represent all the races of Haiti dressed in elegant high style; Augustus Pugin's c. 1845 "Gothic" brass hardware for the Houses of Parliament; Nicole Fiore's c. 1775 watercolor rendering of the decoration for the anteroom of the Queen's bathroom of the Palazzo Reale in Caserta; Sevres porcelains with their original design drawings; embroidered and printed textiles from China, Japan and India; the Parisian fabric designs that make today's efforts look barren.

Among the paintings and drawings are a series of impeccable small oil studies of vast natural wonders done by Frederick Church in the 1860's, a superb Guardi watercolor of a decorative cartouche with a lagoon capriccio, and Elie Nadelman's poetic drawing of a wrought-iron gate for a Long Island estate in the 1930's.

A decorative arts exhibition of this quality and scope prompts some tangent observations. At a time when it is intellectually fashionable to deny traditional concepts of beauty, when exercises in minimalism, nihilism and the apotheosis of the ordinary have achieved cult status, the Cooper-Hewitt offers a kind of authentication of the direct pleasure principle. There is a curious confusion about beauty and pleasure today; a joyless hedonism of sex and food, based on overconsumption, substitutes for the indulgence of more subtle and educated and lasting sensibilities. The Cooper-Hewitt show suggests an easy and guiltless way back to primary esthetic pleasures. We might even regain our senses. ■



Jardinière in cast bronze, designed by Edgar Brandt in France, circa 1925