

# Los Angeles

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## History, Diversity, Design

LOS ANGELES IS MANY THINGS TO MANY PEOPLE. IT IS A CITY OF DIVERSITY, FROM ITS DEMOGRAPHICS to its politics to its architecture. From its earliest days as an arid pueblo to its current incarnation as a major metropolis, the city is constantly evolving. Fueled by its temperate climate, relative youth, and major industries – film and, until recently, aerospace—it is often idealized as a place for growth, innovation, and unlimited possibilities.

There are multiple ways to present our city’s history and many stories to tell. This curriculum traces the history of midcentury L.A. as seen through works of art dating from 1930 to 1965. During this period, the city’s residents experienced several unprecedented historical events, including the Depression and World War II, which significantly changed how people lived. By examining the material culture of the city during this period—architecture, furnishings, fashion, as well as works on paper and photographs—we can learn more about the Angelenos who furnished modern homes and read magazines that provided models for “living in a modern way.” What do these objects tell us about California history and technology? About L.A. as a site for creativity, innovation, and individuality?

### *California: The Golden State*

“California is America, only more so,” author Wallace Stegner declared in 1959. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the state symbolized the good life in America. Thanks to carefully crafted booster images, or images that perpetuated popular perceptions, California was considered a place of excitement, leisure, and abundant health. The thriving economy of the 1920s led its extraordinary population growth. New residents flocked to urban areas, dramatically altering the landscape and changing forever the image of the state as a bucolic Eden of relatively uninhabited mountains, deserts, and shorelines.

Los Angeles in particular exemplified this development: the small agricultural township

established in 1781 as El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Ángeles, in what is now downtown L.A. (in the area near Olvera Street), became a major metropolis. The population of Los Angeles County more than doubled in the 1920s, from little more than 900,000 to more than two million by the end of the decade. The county also expanded its boundaries and, with the demand for subdivided land, assumed its characteristic sprawl. The enclosed aerial views of the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue (now the mid-Wilshire district of the city) illustrates this rapid growth. The population boom continued unabated throughout the Great Depression and World War II, resulting in a critical need for housing and an attendant need for goods and services.



## *Progressive Design*

During this period, California became the country's most important center for progressive architecture and furnishings. Artists' and designers' imaginative applications of war-developed materials and production methods applied to peacetime uses significantly altered the way people lived. By the onset of World War II, the area's newly developed homes and their furnishings were characterized by a particular kind of modernism rooted in California culture and conditions. The general qualities associated with the state (optimism and democracy, fearless experimentation and a love of new technology) as well as those specific to design (an affinity for light and brilliant color, an openness to Asian and Latin influences, an advocacy of fluid spaces and, cross-disciplinary approaches) made California's best products distinctive. "The California Look" became synonymous with a modern way of life, and, as a 1951 article in the *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine* pointed out, a symbol of "The willingness to experiment and be different, to solve problems in California's way." Famously characterized by open floor plans and indoor/outdoor living, the California home became a hugely influential model for the rest of the country and, indeed, the world.



Installation view of *California Design, 1930–1965: "Living in a Modern Way,"* October 1, 2011–June 3, 2012, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

## *Art and Everyday Life*

In 1951 designer Greta Magnusson Grossman described California design as "not a super-imposed style but an answer to present conditions . . . It has developed out of our own preferences for living in a modern way." Part of living in a modern way meant that well-designed objects could function as art in everyday life. This ideal was promoted by Los Angeles-based artist Alvin Lustig, a teacher and mentor to a generation of designers through his instruction at Art Center School (now Art Center College of Design in Pasadena) and the short-lived California School of Art in Los Angeles. He inspired his students to think broadly about their impact on the world and argued for a "wider social role for art that would bring it closer to each and every one of us, out of the museums, into our homes and offices, closer to everything we use and see."<sup>1</sup>

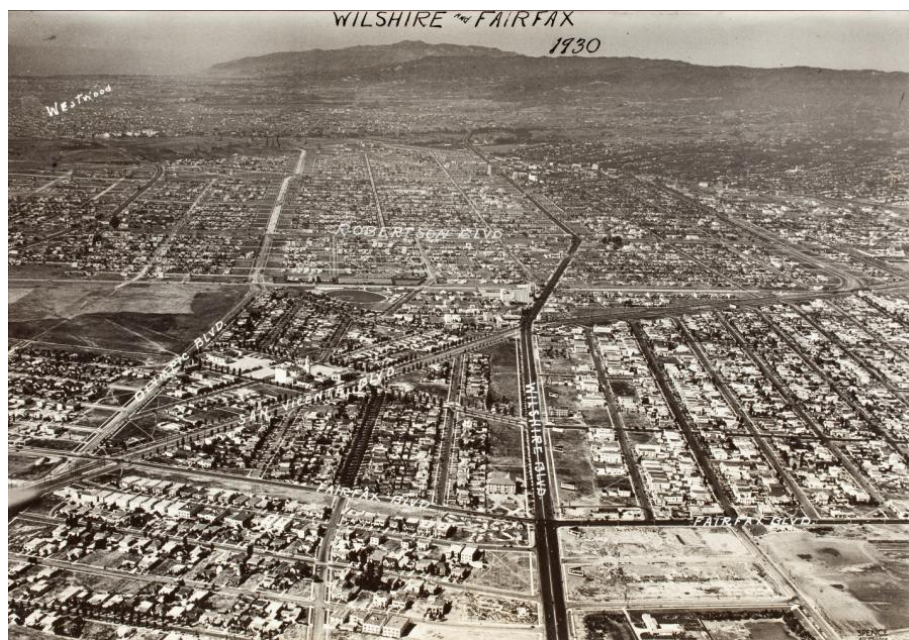
Although not active in the modern-design community, Italian immigrant Simon Rodia, who lived most of his adult years in the Watts district of L.A., certainly embodied Lustig's message and blurred the boundaries between art and everyday life in his extraordinary sculpture, *Watts Towers*. Created out of concrete and appropriated objects, such as plates and bottles, this collection of seventeen interconnected structures, constructed between 1921 and 1954, form an iconic monument in the city of L.A. *Watts Towers* challenges traditional definitions of art and design, and encourages us to see the artistic potential in everyday objects. Over the years, the landmark has become a magnet for artists and created a sense of pride within the community. The *Towers* are a soaring reminder that art is a part of our surroundings. And just as community can affect design, design, in turn, can affect community.

## Views of Wilshire and Fairfax, Los Angeles, 1922 AND 1929

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Spence Air Photos (Los Angeles, c. 1918–1971), View of Wilshire and Fairfax, Los Angeles, 1922, Gelatin silver print, LACMA, Decorative Arts and Design Deaccession Fund (M.2010.32.1) © Spence Air Photos



Spence Air Photos (Los Angeles, c. 1918–1971), View of Wilshire and Fairfax, Los Angeles, 1929, printed 1930, Gelatin silver print. LACMA, Decorative Arts and Design Deaccession Fund (M.2010.32.2) © Spence Air Photos

## *Population Boom: Documenting History*

These aerial views of the intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue date from 1922 and 1929. Open land and a scattering of structures mark the 1922 photo. In contrast, the 1929 photograph is filled with new streets and a variety of buildings as far as the eye can see. What a remarkable change!

- **Past and Present**—Use a thinking map to compare and contrast the photographs, listing the similarities and differences. Do a Google “earth” map search for the intersection of Wilshire and Fairfax today and compare and contrast contemporary views with these archival images. What has changed in nearly one hundred years? What remains the same?

In the twentieth century, as expanding rail lines and, later, cars and the area’s ubiquitous freeways allowed people to quickly travel greater distances, L.A. grew its characteristic sprawl. The development of Wilshire Boulevard, which spans nearly sixteen miles from downtown to the beach, is an example of this growth. In the early twentieth century, the northwest corner of Wilshire and Fairfax served as an airfield for director Cecil B. DeMille, then for Rogers Aircraft. As the automobile displaced the airfields, the area was subdivided and developed. In the 1930s, this corner housed one of the city’s earliest drive-in restaurants.

- **Mapping Your City**—Think of a major intersection in your community. Compare what exists there today with what you know about your community’s history and landscape. (View archival photos in the photo database at the Los Angeles Public Library, [www.lapl.org](http://www.lapl.org).) Then reimagine today’s intersection and what it might look like in the future. Draw your prediction of your community in the year 2111!
- **Architectural Diversity**—The May Company department store was built at this intersection in 1939 by architect Albert C. Martin. The building now houses LACMA West, on LACMA’s campus, and it retains its iconic three-story gold column that resembles a giant lipstick

tube. Visit [www.curatingthecity.org](http://www.curatingthecity.org) to learn more about the variety of architectural styles that exist on the Wilshire Boulevard corridor. Or visit [www.laconservancy.org](http://www.laconservancy.org) to view neighborhood guides to other parts of the city.

## *Diversity of Designers*

Since 1900 Southern California has been a magnet for enormous population movements—both from other parts of the United States and from other parts of the world. Bringing with them a passion for experimentation and progressive design training, the early émigrés who came from Central Europe in the teens and 1920s (for example, Kem Weber, R. M. Schindler, and Richard Neutra) were critical to the formation of *California modern*—a loose but recognizable group of ideas. These seekers of new professional opportunities were joined in the 1930s by other, equally influential émigrés who had fled Nazi persecution. And, particularly in Southern California, they often found patrons for their work in other émigrés.

While the influence of these émigrés was enormous, designers and arts patrons native to the state, as well as transplants from other parts of the country, also were key figures in shaping California modern. For example, architect and painter Millard Sheets was director of the Federal Art Project (FAP) for Southern California, the visual arts branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which gave employment to artists from 1935 to 1943. The FAP/WPA, a component of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal government-spending program, was instrumental in pulling California out of the Great Depression. Like every other state in the country, California was impacted profoundly by the worldwide economic downturn, although it’s still prosperous oil, agriculture, and film industries ensured that it fared better than most regions. What finally succeeded in ending the Depression in Southern California was the huge government investment in the airplane industry, which brought thousands of skilled workers to the region.

- **Painted L.A.**—View the enclosed CD for examples of work by Millard Sheets. What do the details in Millard Sheets’s 1931 painting *Angel’s Flight* tell us about urban life in L.A. during this era?



**“What Makes the California Look,”**  
**Los Angeles Times Home Magazine,”** OCTOBER 21, 1951

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“What Makes the California Look,” *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine*,” October 21, 1951, cover selected and arranged by Richard B. Petterson (1910–1996, active Claremont, California). Collection of Gerard O’Brian. Copyright © 1951, *Los Angeles Times*. Reprinted with permission. Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

## *Designing the California Look*

This sixty-year-old magazine cover from the *Los Angeles Times* asks, “What Makes the California Look?” The answer apparently was so obvious that it was included in the caption: “In this abstract arrangement are the glowing colors, originality of treatment, and simplicity of design that typifies the California look.” Brightly colored furniture, textiles, and ceramics (yellow, burnt orange, and vivid green) dominate the photograph, as does a stripped-down, casual aesthetic that could flourish in the state’s sunny climate.

- **Colorful Compositions**—Identify the colors in your classroom or neighborhood. What primary colors stand out? Secondary and tertiary colors? Group colors into appropriate categories. Do these colors change with the time of day or with the season? Create an abstract composition that captures your colorful environment. Use your color categories to experiment with different arrangements.

The cover depicts the most recognized characteristics of California culture—indoor-outdoor living—and many of the objects assembled have become icons of California design. (See the enclosed CD for examples of chairs, textiles, and ceramics featured in the magazine layout.) Since the state’s benign climate permitted the great outdoors to be incorporated as an extended living room, the photograph highlights objects intended to be used either on a patio or in the living room, such as a planter and lounge chair. The blurring of interior and exterior spaces is emphasized with the prominently featured grill and the garden lamp placed among the interior furnishings. New industrial materials—a fiberglass screen by Spencer Smilie—are displayed with traditional handicrafts, evidence of the fluidity of boundaries.

- **Artistic Choices**—Consider the artistic choices made by the artists and designers who created the furnishings for this photograph. Notice the colors, shapes, patterns, and variety of materials. Study individual objects, noting the relationship between form and function.

## *Adapting New Materials*

The explosive growth of California’s population throughout the period, combined with postwar economic prosperity, led to an unprecedented need for new housing and a burgeoning demand for “contemporary” furnishings. The need to accommodate these new residents was nothing short of an architectural emergency, and the prefabrication techniques and new materials developed during the war were applied to alleviate the situation. Fiberglass, molded plywood, wire mesh, and synthetic resins were some of the materials developed in the early 1940s that would be imaginatively adapted to peacetime use. For example, Charles and Ray Eames worked with fiberglass, which previously had been used primarily for airplane nose cones and radar domes, to create functional, commercial objects such as the *DAX* (dining chair; yellow chair in this image). For the first time, such materials could be applied inexpensively to products for the home, opening a new middle-class market for California modern design. Whether handmade or mass-produced, the goal was to provide well-designed homes and furnishings to the millions of newcomers to the region who craved them.

- **Student as Designer**—Work with a partner, or “client,” to design a chair. Interview the person about his/her preferences. 1) Where will the chair be used? 2) What will it be used for? 3) What will the chair need? 4) What colors, shapes, and motifs would s/he like incorporated into the design? Now that you know your client’s needs, it is time for you, the artist, to create the design. Be sure to take your client’s feedback into consideration. Use sheets of card stock and paper-sculpting techniques such as folding, scoring, and curling to create a basic form. Then organize and apply patterns of color and motifs to design the surfaces of the chair.

## *Stahl House (Case Study House #22), Hollywood Hills, 1959–60*

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Julius Shulman (1910–2009, active Los Angeles), photographer, Pierre Koenig (1925–2004, active Los Angeles), architect *Stahl House (Case Study House #22), Hollywood Hills, 1959–60*, Gelatin silver print, LACMA, gift of the artist and Craig Krull Gallery in honor of Robert Sobieszek (M.2005.191). © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute. Photo courtesy of Museum Associates/LACMA

### *Case Study House Program*

Carefully composed more than fifty years ago, this photograph has become the most iconic image of midcentury Los Angeles. Two women, suspended in time, float above the twinkling lights of the city. The women sit in a glass and

steel pavilion perched in the Hollywood Hills. Julius Shulman's photograph of architect Pierre Koenig's glass-clad, cantilevered *Case Study House #22* is among the most famous architectural photos ever taken in the United States.



- **Design Teams**—In small groups, choose one of the furnishings from the *Los Angeles Times Home Magazine* cover (see previous page) to use as design inspiration. Note all of the formal and functional characteristics of that object. Now, create an architectural blueprint of a home or building designed to house your furnishing of choice. The design of your building should reflect the formal characteristics of the selected object.

In postwar California, inventive new homes rose from the ground by the tens of thousands; they embodied design vocabularies that fit all levels of income and aspiration. The house in this photograph is an example of the renowned architecture that resulted from the experimental Case Study House Program, in which architects were commissioned to design innovative single-family homes. Editor John Entenza selected the participating architects and published reports and photographs of their houses between 1945 and 1966 in his magazine *Arts and Architecture*, one of the leading progressive journals of the time. The influence of these buildings—low-cost prototypes often made with modular, standardized parts—was enormous. In effect, they introduced the middle class to modernism: the simplicity of form, natural light, and seamless connection between inside and outside. At certain times, the homes were open to the public, and the magazine itself was used as a sourcebook by architects in Europe as well as throughout the United States.

### *Framing California Modern*

Photographer Julius Shulman documented nearly an entire century of L.A. history. His best-known images consist of views of modern architecture and design. Mid-twentieth-century homes come alive through Shulman's compositions of carefully posed models set against streamlined furnishings and breathtaking vistas. His photographs promoted the careers of numerous architects, including Richard Neutra, John Lautner, and the architect of this house, Pierre Koenig.

Shulman's photographs shaped outsiders' conception of the city. "People saw a place where you could live outside all year long. Where modernity was embraced and the old norms appeared not to apply . . . Through Julius' lens (and through careful cropping and framing) everything looked beautiful, new and exciting."<sup>2</sup> In fact, some of the documentation of the Case Study Houses was manufactured intentionally to appear distinctly modern. In the well-documented story behind the making of this iconic photograph, Shulman tells of wanting to "breathe some air into the house."<sup>3</sup> The two young women seen chatting, Cynthia Tindle and Ann Lightbody, were not the owners of the home but students whom Shulman recruited to be models. All of the furnishings staged for the shoot were supplied by furniture firm Van Keppel-Green and, when the camera work was completed, were returned to the store to await their next close-up.

- **Artists' Choices**—Shulman carefully composed his images and selected distinctive camera angles. Make a simple viewfinder by rolling a piece of paper into a tube or folding a piece of paper in half, cutting out a square or rectangle along the folded line, and then opening. The viewfinder is a good way to think about the photographer's eye and the camera's lens. Look at the photograph through the viewfinder and consider how the image might appear differently had the artist selected another angle—for example, if he had stayed in the house, rather than photographing the scene from outside.
- **Cropping and Framing**—View an image from history and use your viewfinder to change the composition of the scene. How do your inclusions and exclusions change the narrative that the photo tells? How is this process similar to how history is recorded? Whose side of the story ends up being told? Make your own composition, experimenting with a variety of ways to crop and frame the image. What is captured and what is not? What story or message are you communicating through these inclusions and exclusions?

## *Simon Rodia/Watts Towers*, c. 1950

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Sanford H. Roth (United States, 1906–1962), *Simon Rodia/Watts Towers*, c. 1950, 35mm negative. LACMA, Beulah Roth Bequest (PhA.1993.9.47.38) © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

### *Watts Towers: Our Town*

This photograph from the 1950s captures the artistic and engineering marvel known as the *Watts Towers*. The *Towers*, comprising seventeen structures, the tallest of which stands ninety-nine-and-a-half feet tall, rise up from a simple landscape of one-story houses. The two figures on the sidewalk, the parked cars, and the electrical lines in the background give the viewer a sense of scale.

“I had in mind to do something big and I did it,” said artist Simon Rodia. The structure was single-handedly constructed by Italian immigrant Rodia, who migrated to the United States at around age fifteen. In 1921 he purchased a

triangular-shaped lot in Watts, in South L.A. (This view presents one corner of that lot.) For the next thirty years, he worked without machine equipment, scaffolds, rivets, bolts, welds, or drawing-board designs to build the architectural sculptures. Erected by hand, the *Watts Towers* are made of steel rods wrapped in wire mesh and coated with cement. Embedded into nearly every inch of the environment are shards of ceramics, bottles, tiles, shells, and other scraps, often brought to Rodia by neighborhood residents. (See the detailed views on the next page.) Rodia originally called the iconic monument *Nuestro Pueblo* (“*Our Town*”).



Simon Rodia (Italy, active United States, 1879–1965), *Watts Towers* (detail) Photo by Staci Steinberger, 2010

- **Compare and Contrast**—Like *Case Study House #22* pictured in Julius Shulman’s photograph, the *Watts Towers* are largely constructed of concrete. While different in intention and style, the two structures soar above the city. Note the similarities and differences between the two structures.

Photographer Sanford Roth documented the *Towers* and Rodia in an extensive series of photographs, several of which are highlighted on the enclosed CD. However, he is more well-known for the photographs he took of celebrities in their quiet moments, notably James Dean. Roth’s photography graced the covers and interiors of many of the most popular and prestigious magazines in Europe and the United States in the mid-twentieth century.

### *Material World*

While the *Watts Towers* as a whole demonstrate the powerful vision of one man, the individual pieces give us a glimpse of the material world that surrounded him. Many of the fragments that make up the vibrant designs come from local pottery manufacturers, whose solid-color dinner-ware inspired a national craze in the 1930s. The trend started in Southern California, where companies like Brayton Laguna and Catalina Pottery began producing vivid-colored earthen-ware in the late 1920s and early ’30s. The heyday of California pottery overlaps with Rodia’s construction of the towers (1921–1955), so it is not surprising that fragments of these products, which would have

been inexpensive and plentiful, their characteristic colors intact, appear so frequently in Rodia’s work. The bright ridges in the archway (see detail at left) may have come from a set of Bauer stacking dishes, like the example below from LACMA’s collection.

### *Historic Preservation and Conservation*

Thanks to the work of early preservationists, the *Watts Towers* are now owned by the State of California and managed by the City of Los Angeles. Collectively, it is a National Historic Landmark and one of the most widely recognized works to come out of Southern California in the last century. LACMA recently partnered with the City of L.A.’s Department of Cultural Affairs to work toward the preservation of this landmark work of art. Throughout 2011 LACMA’s Conservation Center is developing a comprehensive plan for the long-term preservation of the *Towers*. Visit [www.lacma.org/art/watts-towers](http://www.lacma.org/art/watts-towers) for clips of conservation scientists at work on this precision-demanding undertaking.

- **Our Town**—Identify everyday design in your community. From murals to architecture and beyond, our neighborhoods are filled with works of art.



Louis Ipsen (Denmark, 1873–1947, active Los Angeles) Victor F. Houser (1905–1998), ceramics engineer, J. A. Bauer Pottery Company (Kentucky, 1885–1909; Los Angeles, 1909–1962) *Stacking Storage Dishes*, c. 1932, earthenware, wood, and steel, LACMA, Decorative Arts and Design Acquisition Fund and partial gift of Bill Stern (M.2010.91.6.1–.4) © Bauer Pottery Company. All rights reserved. Photo © 2011 Museum Associates/LACMA

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kaplan, Wendy, and Bobbye Tigerman, *California Design 1930–1965: Living in a Modern Way*, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne, Christopher, “Julius Shulman Los Angeles’ Has Some New Angles,” in *Los Angeles Times*, April 6, 2011 (<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/books/la-et-04-06-julius-shulman-book-20110406,0,7423770.story>)


<sup>3</sup> “The Making of an Icon: Case Study Houses.” An interview with Julius Shulman, Pierre Koenig, Buck and Carlotta Stahl, Cynthia Tindle, and Ann Lightbody, Taschen ([http://www.taschen.com/pages/en/catalogue/architecture/reading\\_room/10..1.htm](http://www.taschen.com/pages/en/catalogue/architecture/reading_room/10..1.htm))

Pacific Standard Time is an unprecedented collaboration of more than sixty cultural institutions across Southern California, coming together to tell the story of the birth of the L.A. art scene. Initiated through grants from the Getty Foundation, Pacific Standard Time will take place for six months beginning in October 2011.



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