

Exhibition: *Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980*

Dates: October 9, 2022–February 5, 2023

Location: BCAM, Level 2



(Image captions on page 4)

(Los Angeles, CA—July 20, 2022) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980*, the first exhibition to examine the extensive design exchanges between the United States and the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

The exhibition considers Scandinavian design's enduring impact on American culture, as well as the United States' influence on Scandinavian design, over nearly 100 years of cultural exchange. It features the work of Scandinavian designers who immigrated to the United States, Americans who studied or worked in Nordic countries, the ambitious campaigns to market and export Scandinavian design to American consumers, and the American and Nordic figures who championed sustainable and accessible design. Beginning with the arrival of Nordic immigrants in the United States in the 19th century, it traces the burgeoning American interest in Scandinavian design, and concludes by showing how the accessible and sustainable design movements in the 1960s and '70s compelled both U.S. and Nordic designers to focus on pressing real-world problems rather than simply beautiful objects for the elite.

Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980 showcases more than 175 captivating examples of furniture, industrial design, textiles, ceramics, glass, metalwork, jewelry, and lighting drawn from LACMA's collection as well as from North American and Nordic museums and private collections.

"This exhibition proposes a new narrative of American design history, an alternate to the Bauhaus-centered story that focuses on Germany and central Europe. It posits that Scandinavian culture and design had a crucial impact in the United States, beginning in the late 19th century," said Bobby Tigerman, Marilyn B. and Calvin B. Gross

Curator, Decorative Arts and Design at LACMA, who co-curated the exhibition with Monica Obniski, formerly Demmer Curator of 20th- and 21st-Century Design, Milwaukee Art Museum, now Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at the High Museum of Art. “The central themes are the influence of immigrants and their contributions to their adopted countries, the importance of questioning cultural stereotypes and critically analyzing marketing messages to understand their latent meanings, and how concerns about environmental protection and universal accessibility have been part of design discourse since at least the 1960s.”

“This is the first comprehensive Scandinavian design exhibition in the United States in 40 years,” said Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “LACMA has been fortunate to work with the Milwaukee Art Museum and with our international partners to present the remarkable objects that illustrate how Scandinavian design has had a lasting impact on American life, and how that cultural exchange was mutual.”

Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980 is an international collaboration between LACMA, the Milwaukee Art Museum, Nationalmuseum Sweden, Stockholm, and Nasjonalmuseet, Oslo.

Over the years, LACMA has worked with renowned L.A. architects on exhibition design. For this exhibition, Barbara Bestor of Bestor Architecture has created a colorful, immersive, dynamic installation that draws on both the legacy of design in Scandinavia and Los Angeles.

Exhibition Organization

Scandinavian Design and the United States, 1890–1980 is divided into six thematic sections—Migration and Heritage, Teachers and Students, Travel Abroad, Selling the Scandinavian Dream, Design for Diplomacy, and Design for Social Change.

The first section, **Migration and Heritage**, explores how Scandinavian immigrants and their descendants made myriad contributions to the artistic and cultural life of their adopted communities. For example, Swedish-born artist Lillian Holm immigrated to Detroit around 1930, where she worked as a weaver and influential teacher at several Michigan art schools. Her *First Sight of New York* hanging (c. 1930) depicts her awe upon seeing the towering skyscrapers and dense crowds of the metropolis.

In **Teachers and Students**, we see how Scandinavian designers and craftspeople taught in American schools and ultimately shaped the course of American design. One center of influence was the Cranbrook Academy of Art near Detroit, Michigan, for which Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen was hired to design both the physical campus and pedagogical structure. He envisioned its plan and major buildings, as seen in his

“Cranbrook Map” hanging (1935). He also hired leading Nordic artists as faculty, such as ceramist Maija Grotell, sculptor Carl Milles, and weaver Marianne Strengell—all of whose work is also in this section—and who in turn attracted promising American students including Charles and Ray Eames, Florence Knoll, Ed Rossbach, and Toshiko Takaezu.

Travel Abroad illustrates how cultural exchange between the Nordic countries and the United States was sustained through travel fellowships, formal academic programs, and apprenticeships. Howard Smith was an African American artist who moved to Finland to escape systemic racism and lack of professional opportunities in his home country. Smith’s printed textile (c. 1978) for the Finnish firm Vallila became popular as a home decoration, and was exported back to the United States.

Selling the Scandinavian Dream examines how the image of Scandinavia was sold to American consumers by evoking the parallel mythic “American dream,” the notion that consumer capitalism can lead to class mobility and a better quality of life, and how the marketing of Scandinavian design exploited a variety of recently debunked stereotypes and myths about the Nordic region and Nordic people. This is exemplified by the colorful tablewares produced by the company Dansk. For many Americans, Dansk’s enameled steel and carved teak products are a quintessential example of Scandinavian design. However, Dansk is an American company, founded by a New York entrepreneur who worked with Danish designer Jens H. Quistgaard. Through strategic marketing and naming (Dansk translates to “Danish”), Dansk effectively capitalized on Americans’ admiration for Scandinavian design.

Design for Diplomacy considers how nations have long used design and architecture to advance their political goals through the “soft power” of cultural propaganda, through national pavilions at world’s fairs, traveling museum exhibitions, and the construction of diplomatic architecture like embassies. Sometimes, their goals were overtly political—the Scandinavian countries sought to align themselves with the democratic, capitalist side of the Cold War divide by appealing to American tastes and associating their products with values of freedom, democracy, and openness. The greatest manifestation of international diplomacy in the post-World War II era was the United Nations headquarters (1946–52), built in New York City as a place for nations to gather peacefully. Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were invited to design the three largest meeting halls. Swedish designer Marianne Richter’s vibrant tapestry curtain (c. 1951) provided the focal point for Sweden’s contribution, the Economic and Social Affairs Council Chamber. It enlivened the otherwise neutrally toned, modernist space, adding warmth to support the diplomatic and humanitarian mission of the Council.

In the final section, **Design for Social Change**, we see how the turbulent social and political conditions of the late 1960s prompted some designers to think critically about

their work, envisioning a new role for design within society, and considering how design could address systemic problems such as the planet's dwindling resources, overconsumption and excessive waste, safety, and physical barriers to access. Swedish designers such as Maria Benktzon and Sven-Eric Juhlin created household products based on ergonomic research, while American designer Niels Diffrient worked with a team in the design firm Henry Dreyfuss Associates to publish *Humanscale* (1974), an ergonomic design guide that accounted for a range of bodies, including wheelchair users, rather than focusing on average proportions and able-bodied users. Contemporary designers' concern for solving endemic problems and addressing urgent global needs demonstrates the legacy of this design critique that emerged in the United States and the Nordic countries.

Publication

The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue edited by Bobbye Tigerman and Monica Obniski and designed by Lorraine Wild and Xiaoqing Wang of Green Dragon Studio. Wild is an alumna of the Cranbrook Academy of Art and her educational experiences there informed the design of the book. Contributors include Glenn Adamson, Arndís Árnadóttir, Charlotte Ashby, Graham Boettcher, Danielle Charlap, Kjetil Fallan, Diana Jocelyn Greenwold, Denise Hagströmer, Helena Kåberg, Alexandra Lange, Cara McCarty, Monica Penick, Hannah Pivo, Rosanne Somerson, and Erica Warren.

Credit

This exhibition is co-organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Milwaukee Art Museum in collaboration with the Nationalmuseum Sweden and the Nasjonalmuseet in Norway

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About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of more than 147,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global

partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Image captions: Gorham Manufacturing Company, Durgin Division, *Viking Boat Centerpiece*, model D 900, designed c. 1905, collection of the Art Fund, Inc. at the Birmingham Museum of Art; purchase with funds provided by Guy R. Kreusch, photo © Birmingham Museum of Art, by Sean Pathasema; Finn Juhl for Baker Furniture, Inc., Armchair, model 400-1/2, designed 1951, Milwaukee Art Museum, bequest of Dr. Lucille Cohn, photo © Milwaukee Art Museum, by John R. Glembin; Kaj Franck for Nuutajärvi Glassworks, Goblets, model KF 486, designed 1968, these examples c. 1970–71, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Decorative Arts and Design Council Fund and partial gift of Marc Treib, photo © Museum; Howard Smith for Vallila, Textile, designed c. 1978, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Kenneth Erwin, © Erik J. Smith & Erna Aaltonen, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

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