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Marketing American High Design to Europe: MoMA's “Design for Use, USA”, 1951-1952

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Abstract: As we are poised on the cusp of the next paradigm shift driven by digital technology, it is timely to reflect on the nature and outcomes of an earlier paradigm shift: the global proliferation of American consumer items in the postwar period. From late 1954, the dispersal of US goods reached a point of acceleration after the Eisenhower Administration began to aggressively promote the notion that a global consumer economy on the US model was the only effective means of preserving civilization from the Communist threat. To this end the Office of International Trade Fairs, with substantial donations from the corporate sector, sent American consumer items to international trade fairs and world's fairs to promote American business methods and to open up the economies of European nations to American companies.

What then should be made of the Museum of Modern Art's decision to join forces with the US Government four years earlier to mount exhibitions of American design for circulation in Europe? On the face of it, this little known initiative, with its government sponsorship and attendant political aspirations, should perhaps be identified as an important precursor to the trade shows of American mass-produced consumer items sent to Europe by the Eisenhower Administration. However, this paper pursues the case that political agendas account for only one dimension of MoMA's design initiative. While the narrative for each exhibition varied, collectively MoMA through its judicious selection of the contents and through the rhetoric of the catalogue essays, respectfully announced the arrival of an American 'high design'. The exhibition organizers did this to persuade Europeans of the strength and viability of American postwar design and in the process to insert American design within the history of design. The paper uses as a case study of "Design for Use, USA," (1951-1952) the first MoMA design exhibition sent to Europe, to trace the exhibition organizers' motivations for the show. It examines the connections and continuities between MoMA's local promotion of American design via the *Good Design* program established to improve the quality of American consumer items and the museum's subsequent promotion of American design throughout Europe.

Key words: *design history, design exhibitions, Museum of Modern Art, international exhibitions*

1. Introduction

In March 1951, the Museum of Modern Art's "Design for Use, USA" opened at the Landgewerbemuseum in Stuttgart, West Germany. This large exhibition of American design for the domestic setting toured through Europe with sponsorship provided by the Department of State and the European Cooperation Administration (ECA). "Design for Use, USA" represents a key episode in MoMA's history. This was the first time that MoMA had profiled the output of American designers for audiences abroad, in this instance Germany, Italy and France. Moreover, the exhibition presented Europeans with the first extensive examination of some of the most prominent producers of modern design at work in the US at mid-century. The curator of the exhibition, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., selected a range of works by over 150 American designers and manufacturers among them Eva Zeisel, Earl Tupper (inventor of Tupperware), George Nelson and Charles Eames.

Despite its apparent ground breaking character, "Design for Use, USA" has subsequently assumed the status of an historical footnote within MoMA's history and more generally design history. This occurrence may be attributed to the concentration of energy by scholars on MoMA's almost parallel promotion of postwar abstraction during the Cold War. As a result there is now an immense body of scholarship on this topic. There is also wide acceptance amongst the academic and the museum community that postwar abstraction functioned as a symbol and tool of American imperialism and that MoMA played a central role in that undertaking. It is thus time to reflect on the significance of MoMA's response to governmental requests for exhibitions of American design at the outset of the 1950s.

Arthur Pulos is one of the few scholars to specifically mention "Design for Use, USA". In a chapter bearing the title "Altruism and Diplomacy", Pulos claims for MoMA an important role in American efforts to assist with US diplomacy during the cold war. In contextualizing his assertion, Pulos notes that the US Government became interested in sending export products to Europe on learning that the Soviet Union had been distributing its wares to trade fairs with the primary goal of promoting communism. Underlying the U.S.'s interest was the realization that capitalism and communism were now facing each other along a frontier of war-ravaged countries that were, as yet, politically as well as economically uncommitted. But as Pulos notes, there was no single government agency responsible for organizing official US representations at international trade fairs until late 1954 when the Office of International Trade Fairs was established. From this time forward the Eisenhower Administration aggressively dispersed exhibitions of American consumer items to trade fairs throughout Europe. This was done in the belief that persuading other nations of the benefits of a global consumer economy on the US model functioned as an effective means of saving civilization from the threat of communism. It was relatedly a strategy to promote American business methods and to open up the economies of European nations to American companies.

Pulos suggests that in the years prior to the establishment of the Office of International Trade Fairs, MoMA fulfilled a vital diplomatic function by assembling exhibitions like "Design for Use, USA" to make known in other parts of the world American products and American design philosophy.[1] In this sense "Design for Use, USA" should be identified as an important precursor to the trade shows of the later 1950s. However, this paper argues that political agendas represented only one (albeit key) dimension of MoMA's design initiative: MoMA also used this governmental request as an opportunity to advance long term agendas germane to its museological interests.

That “Design for Use, USA” did indeed possess a decisive “diplomatic” or political function is underscored by the fact that the Department of State and the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) joined forces to sponsor the exhibition. Both parties were directly involved in the Marshall Plan (1948-1951), a massive relief effort launched by the US in the postwar period to rebuild economically dislocated European countries to prevent them from succumbing to communism. This was the ‘natural’ responsibility for the Department of State, the government entity responsible for formulating and implementing foreign policy with the view to maintaining security and other interests of the US. The ECA was a more recent phenomenon established in 1948 by Congress to administer the Marshall Plan. The ECA disseminated financial aid and with it propaganda to make clear “the nature and motives of American economic assistance and to counter the “distortions widely broadcast by Soviet propaganda.” [2] As historian Richard Pells notes the Department of State and the ECA worked together to bring about the wholesale adoption of American practices within Europe. “Through documentary films, radio programs, posters, pamphlets, photographic exhibits, cartoon strips, and mobile puppet shows, they advertised the United States as a land of free enterprise, free unions, free trade and free spending – a land that Europe could emulate if it accepted the key American principles of economic efficiency, high wages, and unlimited productivity.[3]

Paul Hofmann, a successful automobile industry executive who headed the ECA, believed that US efforts to win other countries over to democracy required more than international prosperity arguing that everyone aspired to a higher level of existence. For this reason, he promoted mass production and the consumer society. To this end the ECA hired able staff from high profile American media outlets and even cultural institutions like MoMA to promote its ideas via radio, film and traveling exhibitions. [4] While clearly a miniscule element of this larger initiative, “Design for Use, USA” with its emphasis on quality American design wares appears to fit comfortably within this larger effort to provide tangible evidence of the benefits of productivity currently available to Americans.

Today art museums might balk at the negative ramifications of accepting a commission that contributed to a program so closely associated with generating and disseminating propaganda. However, as a long-term supporter of the US Government’s efforts to meet ‘informational’ objectives abroad through the arts, MoMA was more than willing to assist. [5] In fact, comments made by senior staff suggest that the museum believed it was a moral obligation to do so. In the late 1930s MoMA’s Department of Circulating Exhibitions had undergone an expansion to meet the many requests by government agencies for informational exhibitions during World War II. During the war years alone MoMA assembled and circulated no less than 38 exhibitions of painting, architecture, sculpture, industrial design, film, and photography on behalf of various government agencies. [6] Following d’Harnoncourt’s appointment as director by 1949, and McCray’s installation as head of the Department of Circulating Exhibitions two years earlier MoMA accelerated its efforts to foster international understanding through cultural exchange.[7] Both were devoted internationalists with a wealth of experience in the development of government backed cultural exchange programs bringing both in contact with MoMA during the war years. D’Harnoncourt made clear his commitment to this effort in a speech he delivered to the American Association of Museums: “Much as we may object to using the arts as instruments of conquest or even as propaganda, it seems to me quite obvious that there is no basic conflict between the aims and ideals of art museums and the avowed purpose of current governmental activities in the arts, that is to further national welfare through international understanding.”[8] While d’Harnoncourt’s remarks were presented in 1962 this policy of

actively supporting the government was set in motion soon after his appointment as director.

With the infrastructure in place and possessed of a firm belief that cultural exchange could facilitate the attainment of national goals in the changed political and cultural climate of the postwar period, MoMA was thus well placed to respond to request by government agencies. “Design for Use, USA” represents one of the earliest projects taken up by MoMA in pursuit of its expanding international profile. However, MoMA had a particular interest in this project, one that related to its long-term advocacy of the cause of design (European and American) and more recently the showcasing of recent examples of high quality American design through the recent *Good Design* exhibitions.

As the first art museum in the world to accommodate design within an institution devoted to fine art, MoMA claimed for itself a unique position not only in the US but also in the history of museums. [9] From its inception in 1929, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., then director, had conceived of MoMA as an institution embracing all the modern arts. By 1940 MoMA had presented exhibitions or established departments devoted to the various arts Barr had originally proposed, including industrial design, architecture, photography, and typography, along with the more traditional arts of painting, sculpture and drawing.[10] Through a regular program of exhibitions of local and European design and through its international design competitions, MoMA had by the early 1950s, constructed for itself a leading role in setting the standards of American modern design. This is a point acknowledged by Terry Smith who claims that MoMA rather than the burgeoning profession of industrial design “shaped the modern visual culture of the US, determining its look and setting its standards.” [11]

MoMA’s *Good Design* program (1950-1955) conceived by Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., former director of MoMA’s Department of Industrial Design, represents a crucial component of this taste-making initiative. And significantly for the findings of this paper the *Good Design* program would, under Kaufmann’s direction, become the launching point for MoMA’s European promotion of American design. [12] Implemented jointly by Kaufmann on behalf of MoMA and the Merchandise Mart, (the largest wholesale marketer in the US), the *Good Design* program comprised a series of exhibitions of innovative and purchasable design items selected for their quality and ‘eye appeal’ by a changing team of experts from the design profession and museum world and headed by Kaufmann. [13] The resulting exhibitions, pitched directly at manufacturers, designers and consumers were constructed to foster the appreciation and in turn production of good design in the US. [14]

The concept of ‘good design’ was not invented by Kaufmann but had appeared in different European countries and in the US soon after World War II. While each country put its individual spin on the concept, what unified these various manifestations was a singular commitment to the production and promotion of ‘good’ modern design, which often translated into the promotion of a spare design without applied decoration. It was also embraced as a means to boost the quality and profile of a nation’s design output. In 1944, for example, Britain established the Council of Industrial Design (COID) to promote the cause of British design through an extensive program of exhibitions and an elaborate program of marketing. At the same time similar ideas were espoused through the revival of the Milan Triennial. [15] It is in relation to initiatives of this kind that we should consider MoMA’s interest in promoting the notion of good design within the US.

Apparently encouraged by the enthusiastic response by American and European viewers to the *Good Design* exhibitions MoMA expanded the initiative to Europe. Beginning in August of 1950, after the second *Good Design* show a flurry of articles appeared in newspapers and trade journals across the country announcing news of MoMA’s intention to send abroad the first of a series of exhibitions of American industrial design

items.[16] The New York based *Retailing Daily* noted that a newfound respect accorded American design in Europe had motivated MoMA's decision to extend the reach of the *Good Design* program to the international context. This was followed by a quote from Kaufmann who explained that in the past the US tended to look to Europe for "...style leadership. But since the war" Kaufmann claimed, "European magazines have been increasingly active in showing American home furnishings...[Now] we are beginning to be accepted by Europeans as design originators; they recognize American progressive design in its own right in addition to their interest in the purely commercial side of the United States market." [17] Such an assertion is significant in that it makes clear Kaufmann's belief that American progressive design had now emerged as a creative force, warranting the international circulation of high quality recent American design wares. Perhaps buoyed by the belief that similar kinds of exhibitions would be equally well received in Europe Kaufmann indicated that the inaugural international exhibition, "Design for Use, USA" would contain many of the same design items, or other works by the same designers and manufacturers. This was certainly the case, but there were also important differences between the two ventures. While Kaufmann did include in "Design for Use, USA" wares previously exhibited in the *Good Design* series he also chose a substantial number of items produced across the course of the 1940s. In so doing, Kaufmann constructed an exhibition that departed significantly from the reformist impulse of the *Good Design* series: to improve the quality of design in the U.S. by identifying and presenting for the edification of manufacturers, designers and the public the best quality design wares available on the US market in the last year. So how specifically did these two ventures compare?

"Design for Use, USA" like the earlier *Good Design* exhibitions brought together products by a wide range of designers and manufacturers. Featured were products by large-scale American manufacturers some of whom had been in production since the late 19th century. For some of the older firms, the new lines of merchandise chosen for display came about as a result of a major rethinking of the place and the importance of design within the manufacturing process, changes which occurred during or just after World War II. At the same time the *Good Design* exhibitions provided a regular forum for the work of a suite of relatively new American companies. Notable among them were a handful of small-scale furniture design firms responsible for manufacturing the furniture of some of the most inventive designers in the US in the postwar period. Among them were Charles Eames, Isamu Noguchi and George Nelson for the *Herman Miller Furniture Co.* and Eero Saarinen for *Knoll Associates, Inc* (see fig. 1). Chairs, divans, couches, light fitting, and tables by these innovative, modern designers figured prominently in "Design for Use, USA".



Fig. 1. Eero Saarinen, Chairs for Knoll Associates

While the number of men outnumbered women designers, the *Good Design* exhibitions and “Design for Use, USA” both featured a strong representation of work by women practitioners some of whom would become leaders in their fields. For example, Edith Heath, the well-respected West Coast ceramicist who secured her national reputation after 1946 when she began mass-producing her wares. Another was industrial designer Freda Diamond named in 1954 by *Life* magazine as the “Designer for Everybody” for the reasonably priced products she designed for many American firms, among them the Libbey Glass company. Products made by creative design partnerships were also a feature of the *Good Design* initiative, for example, the ceramicists Gertrude and Otto Natzler who came to national attention for their hand-thrown, egg-shell thin ceramics with lava-like glazes.

“Design for Use, USA” diverged from the *Good Design* exhibitions in two key ways. First, Kaufmann selected only American wares for this inaugural international exhibition a decision no doubt guided by a desire to promote specifically American design wares to European audiences. No such nationalistic agenda underpinned the *Good Design* series. Wares made abroad could be selected for the *Good Design* series if available on the US market in the last 12 months. And from the outset, the ‘foreign’ contribution was almost invariably Scandinavian design, underscoring the position of dominance within the field of design these Northern European countries occupied during and after the war. [18] Second, where the *Good Design* exhibitions had served as a platform for promoting only the latest in progressive design “Design for Use, USA” Kaufmann featured ‘older’ design items, many of which had been produced across the decade of the 1940s. The show included, for example, Eva Zeisel’s “Museum” range manufactured by Castleton China in 1946 and the Chemex coffee maker made in 1941 by Dr. Peter Schlumbohm for Chemex (see fig. 2).

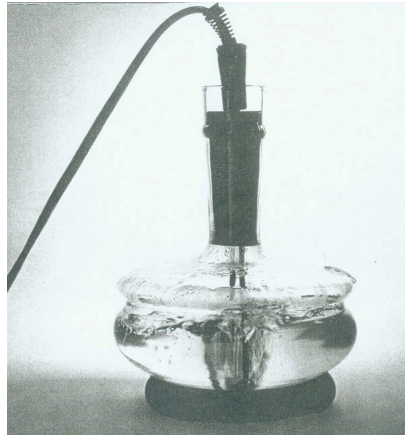


Fig. 2 Peter Schlumbohm, Chemex coffee maker

Kaufmann also selected industrial design items produced by venerable American firms like Revere Copper, the International Silver Company and the Viking Glass Company. While not eligible for inclusion in the *Good Design* series because of their age all these products had received the imprimatur of the museum having appeared at least once in MoMA's *Useful Objects* exhibitions between 1938 and 1947. Where *Useful Objects* exhibitions showcased design wares of low price and practicality with aesthetics considerations placed last, the central criteria for the *Good Design* series was on 'eye appeal'. Regardless of the stated differences however, the earlier series had in Kaufmann's opinion also brought quality design to public attention.[19] Guided by this belief, Kaufmann turned to the earlier series as reliable resource when choosing works for this international exhibition.

After viewing "Design for Use, USA" American journalist Harriet Morrison concluded that the exhibition was intended to convey the "ingenuity of American designers." [20] Kaufmann's inclusion of novel items like a see-through plastic bassinette, rugs made of paper and a small revolving dining-chair seems to support this view.

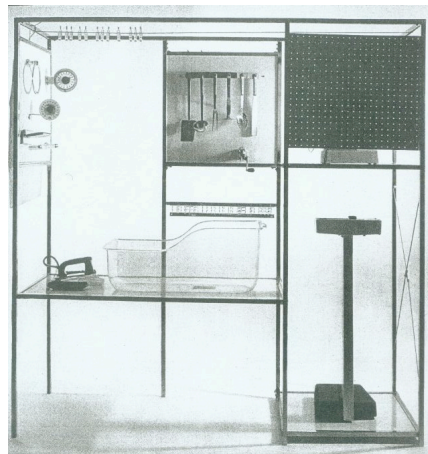


Fig. 3 Harry M. Berner "Plastic bassinette" for Plastics Incorporated

However, as the foregoing discussion attests, Kaufmann drew together a select range of merchandise produced over a decade, the bulk of which had been vetted either internally by MoMA through its *Useful Objects* series or externally by representatives from the museum and design professions in the instance of the *Good Design* series. In so doing, Kaufmann had constructed for European viewers an exhibition far more ambitious in scope than merely conveying American ingenuity and one that implicitly presented the emergence of a specifically modern American design tradition, worthy of display within Europe.

With that said we should not lose sight of the fact that MoMA's desire to build European awareness and

appreciation of modern American design could readily be addressed while simultaneously accommodating the broadly defined objectives of the Department of State and the ECA: to present the positive gains of American-style mass production for the lifestyle of the average person within economically vulnerable countries, key amongst them West Germany, France and Italy (all 'hosts' of "Design for Use, USA"). The government could not do this effectively by promoting the quality of American culture. It could however, be done by a highly respected cultural institution like MoMA, lending its reputation to the government, but at the same time exercising its authority by maintaining control over what objects it would select and promote within the context of seemingly neutral exhibitions of design. In addition, comments made by Kaufmann to the press indicate that he and by inference MoMA, actively supported the government in achieving these broad objectives. In a statement released to the media, Kaufmann made clear that "Design for USA" would play a key role in helping to shape European perceptions of contemporary American life. Using rhetoric fashionable during the cold war era, Kaufmann confidently asserted that, "In Europe as well as in America we have found a wonderful response in the press to our "Good Design" exhibitions...This encourages the belief that a discriminating show of American home furnishing design can present the best and most progressive side of our life to the European public in terms which are internationally understandable and sympathetic." [21] This was a point underscored by *The Times* of Louisville, Kentucky. Likely working from a press release distributed by MoMA's Publicity Department the unnamed reporter noted that "Design for Use, USA" was an exhibition selected to present in tangible form the benefits of the US's high productivity and output of high quality design items on the American lifestyle. "Through the exhibit Europeans will be shown how the average American woman achieves beauty in her home through the use of articles of good design and sound craftsmanship...The show...demonstrates that even the assembly line can turn out well-designed articles combining beauty and efficiency." [22]

2. Conclusions

More research is now required to assess the impact of this and later exhibitions of American industrial design sent abroad by MoMA and the US Government until 1955. However, the foregoing discussion indicates that "Design for Use, USA" functioned in part as a precursor to the global proliferation of American consumer items accelerated in late 1954 by the Eisenhower Administration through the Office of International Trade Fairs. Difference of scale aside, "Design for Use, USA", like the later trade shows represented an effort to persuade other nations of the positive aspects of the American model in opposition to any alternative mounted by the Soviet Union. With that said MoMA's decision to expand offshore represented more than just an effort to advance the foreign policy interests of the US. It was the result of three factors: 1) the US Government's commitment to sponsoring US representations of American consumer wares as part of its struggle to contain communism, 2) MoMA's ongoing commitment to using culture to support the government's foreign policy objectives, and 3) MoMA's desire to advance its museological interests – in this instance to collect, present and disseminate nationally and internationally modern American industrial design as worthy of a place within the history of modern design.

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